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CALHOUN AND THE CONCEPT OF THE "REACTIONARY  
ENLIGHTENMENT": AN EXAMINATION OF THE  
DISQUISITION ON GOVERNMENT

VOLUME I

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1950s, Louis Hartz drew attention to the curiously paradoxical nature of antebellum Southern political thought by coining the descriptive phrase, the "Reactionary Enlightenment". The essence of the paradox lay in the apparent impossibility of combining a coherent defence of human slavery with the prevailing ethos of liberal political theory, represented most succinctly by the political values of John Locke, which Americans had been importing throughout the course of the eighteenth century, and to which they had become ideologically attached during the Revolutionary period. The South, arguably the most liberal region of the nation in the 1780s and 1790s, became increasingly intolerant and authoritarian in response to repeated abolitionist attacks from the 1830s onwards, though the pervasiveness of their former liberal convictions proved to be a straitjacket on their mental processes, preventing Southern thinkers, like Calhoun, from transcending the liberal thought patterns they had inherited and from fabricating a convincing and meaningful defence of slavery.

The following study is an attempt to evaluate the usefulness of the "Reactionary Enlightenment" concept as a categorical paradigm of Calhoun's Disquisition on Government. In Part One, we shall be concerned with preliminary methodological questions (chapter one), and external details concerning the composition of the text, including Calhoun's intended audience (Chapter Two). Part Two is entirely devoted to the task of clarifying the possible senses in which the Disquisition may be said to belong to the "Reactionary Enlightenment". The procedure followed is to identify the basic features of the Enlightenment style, and to distinguish those components of the Disquisition which conform most nearly to them. Thus, we shall be examining Calhoun's philosophical method, his religious attit-

udes, his concept of human nature and his idea of progress. In the penultimate chapter we shall examine the most original of Calhoun's contributions to political theory, the idea of the concurrent majority. The central argument of the study is that while Calhoun attempts to defend values which may be termed reactionary, he does so by utilising the apparatus of liberal discourse, and this accounts for much of the appearance of inconsistency in his political theory.



For my Mother and Father  
who have given me so much  
love and support  
and for Him who sent me  
words of encouragement  
from Hebrews 10: 35-36 at  
the bleakest moment:

"So do not throw away your  
confidence; it will be richly  
rewarded. You need to persevere  
so that when you have done the  
will of God, you will receive  
what he has promised."

And, of course, for Chrissy....

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For if truth be at all within the reach of human capacity, 'tis certain it must lie very deep and abstruse; and to hope we shall arrive at it without pains, while the greatest geniuses have failed with the utmost pains, must certainly be esteemed sufficiently vain and presumptuous. I pretend to no such advantage in the philosophy I am going to unfold, and would esteem it a strong presumption against it, were it so very easy and obvious.

David Hume

A Treatise of Human Nature

PART ONE

POLITICAL THEORY AND THE POLITICAL TEXTS OF CALHOUN



## Chapter One:        The Study of Political Texts

In an influential article published in 1954, Andrew Hacker addressed himself to the question of how political theory ought to be studied, and in particular how scholars ought to approach what he termed the "Great Books". Hacker maintained that from the perspective of the political scientist, whose primary concern is with contemporary political forms and structures, the texts of political theory ought to be treated as "timeless", that is containing principles of universal application, irrespective of the temporal or cultural context that gave rise to them. Hacker derived this approach from his basic assumption that the function of political theory is two-fold: to provide an explanation of actual behaviour (causal theory) and to lay down principles of how people ought to behave (ethical theory). The preeminent function of the political theorist, in Hacker's formulation, is to make causal and ethical generalisations about political behaviour which hold true for all periods of history, including the present.<sup>1</sup>

Hacker's article served to rekindle the flagging debate between the two orthodox, though conflicting schools of thought in the study of political theory. Hacker's strenuous argument in favour of regarding the texts as autonomous is countered by the argument that the meaning of a particular text can only be properly understood by taking account of the peculiar cultural factors which obtained at the time of

writing. The unstated assumption of the contextualist approach is that ideas do not arise in a vacuum, but are particular responses to concrete and specific conditions; without those conditions the text would not have been written, nor would it have needed to have been written. The contextualists, then, assume that there exists an intimate and causal connection between a particular political text and the perceived social environment which, properly speaking, gave rise to it.

The essential difference between textual criticism and the history of ideas is, therefore, one of approach and emphasis. Both, from their respective vantage points, seek to answer different types of questions about the same subject-matter. Yet any cross-fertilisation is effectively prevented because the assumptions underlying either approach are logically incompatible with each other. John Plamenatz has attempted to argue that although "theories are products of their age ... [they] are also ageless."<sup>2</sup> But clearly, if one takes the position that social and political theories are tied to the context in which they were written, a full and complete understanding of their meaning requires a knowledge other than the texts themselves; their agelessness, then, does not spring simply from the texts but from the complex interaction of cultural assumptions which operated on the mind of the author. When students of contemporary politics scan the texts of a past age in search of solutions to modern problems, they miss the point of the enterprise. Any solutions, even if they were appropriate in their own time, were applicable precisely



because the confluence of religious, social, political and economic factors to which they were addressed, still obtained and gave them particular meaning. It is often a more fruitful way of approaching political texts to regard them as identifying certain recurring problem-areas - what Sheldon Wolin has called "a continuity of preoccupations"<sup>3</sup> - rather than the particular solutions they offer. The protection of minorities, some scholars would argue,<sup>4</sup> was the main concern which prompted the writing of Calhoun's Disquisition on Government, and continues to be a concern today for those who share liberal-democratic assumptions. Yet, while Calhoun's identification of the generic problem persists, few would propose adopting a twentieth-century version of the concurrent majority as a means of protection for ethnic, regional and occupational minorities.<sup>5</sup> The mechanics of Calhoun's solution suited (even if they did that) the particular circumstances of mid-nineteenth America, but are hardly considered applicable today.

But if there serious dangers involved in adopting a purely textual approach, there are equal objections to the most extreme claims of the contextualist school. The central danger lies in the mistaken supposition that an adequate historical understanding of the social context can effectively explain (or explain away) the meaning of a particular text. It presupposes, in other words, that a coincidence of cultural factors has caused the text to be written and once one has uncovered the relevant social and political factors involved one has effectively explained the existence of the text. It is this mode of thinking which has led some historians of ideas to speak of the

"real" or "true" meaning of a particular text with little or no reference to what it actually said.<sup>6</sup>

Quentin Skinner has admirably pointed out that there is a very real sense in which an understanding of the causes of an action or an utterance is not "equivalent to an understanding of the action itself." Skinner maintains that even though an understanding of an action presupposes a grasp of "antecedent causal conditions", it also presupposes that the student grasps the "point of the action for the agent who performed it." Skinner thus makes the distinction between understanding the circumstances which give rise to a text and the author's purpose in writing it. The difference is characterised most succinctly by Skinner as the intention to write the text and the intention in writing the text. While study of the social context is sufficient for explaining what forces operated on the author to persuade him to write the text, such a method is inappropriate for telling us precisely what the author wished to convey to his intended audience.<sup>7</sup> The extreme version of contextual methodology can lead to a muddled kind of determinism where the text is either disregarded entirely or, worse, made to conform by means of agonising intellectual contortions to supposed historical reality. Thus, the "real" intention "behind" Calhoun's Disquisition is to provide an elaborate defence of slavery, irrespective of what Calhoun had actually written in the text. Commentators who engage in this kind of activity are no longer concerned with tracing the history of ideas but in creating intellectual mythologies.

It follows from what has been said that neither of the



two orthodox approaches to the study of political theory is entirely free from conceptual error. Although scholars have rarely pushed such methodological autonomy to its extreme limits, much of their research suffers from an imprecise and haphazard conceptual base which tends to denigrate the often valuable information it contains. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that the history of ideas, as Philip Wiener has shown, is not a pure or original discipline "but a composite or derivative one because it is dependent on other disciplines whose borders it penetrates."<sup>8</sup> But given the genuine desire to understand, this is not an insuperable difficulty. It is unfortunate that what appears to be academic entrenchment often prevents an effective division of labour which might benefit both approaches and serve to clarify the ambivalent identity of the discipline. John Dunn has argued that too much valuable energy has been wasted in disagreements about the appropriate methods of studying political theory and he has pleaded that the division between historians and philosophers be healed so that both types of explanation can contribute to an overall understanding; "the completion of both types of investigation", he maintains, "is a necessary preliminary to the construction of an indefeasible explanation of either type."<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, historians of ideas and textual exegetes continue to confine themselves within self-imposed boundaries and attempt to ignore each other's existence. As a result, the research they engage in produces only a partial understanding of the subject-matter they study.

Evidence of this general malady may be discerned in the



existing studies of Calhoun's political theory. Two book-length analyses of his political ideas exist: August O. Spain's The Political Theory of John C. Calhoun and Richard Current's John C. Calhoun. Although both adopt broadly the same approach, there are variations which bear individual examination.<sup>10</sup>

Spain's book, researched during the 1930's, but not published until 1951, sought to offer "a comprehensive exposition" of Calhoun's political theory and to correct "errors of analysis and interpretation" which earlier studies had embodied. Spain made a particular effort to identify the historical origins of Calhoun's ideas, both within the mainstream of western political thought and in the historical events of his lifetime. One of Spain's main contentions was that although Calhoun's theory "arose in part out of rationalization for the political defense of Southern civilization", he also sought "to base his political doctrines upon concepts of universal and enduring validity." As if to prove the point, Spain attempted to "point out some possible significance in Calhoun's thought, for present day political problems."<sup>11</sup>

As an exposition of Calhoun's thought, Spain's work is comprehensive, but this is more than offset by its lack of critical analysis. Spain made little attempt to examine Calhoun's theory on theoretical grounds and to investigate the logical implications of the ideas he describes. His failure to do so is especially baffling in the light of his attempt to adapt the theory of the concurrent majority to the rural-urban problem of America. We have already noted that by and large this kind of exercise - seeking solutions to current

problems in the texts of a past age - is sterile, but Spain compounds the error by failing even to examine it for coherence. For a theory to be accepted as worthy of consideration, let alone implementation, it is reasonable to assume that its coherence ought to be established by means of logical analysis. If it can be shown that the conclusions do not follow from the premises, then the theory is said to be logically faulty. The purpose of the commentator who is interested in adapting theoretical solutions of the past to modern problems - even if this were a legitimate exercise - must surely include a rigorous testing of their logical consistency. If they are inconsistent, then they must either be discarded or, at very least, reconstructed. Spain's omission in this regard mars what otherwise is a sound exposition.

One of Spain's main concerns was to attempt to relate the elements of Calhoun's thought to the ideas of other political theorists. This aspect of the work, arguably the most ambitious and useful, is also the one which contains major deficiencies of method. In attempting to relate Calhoun's ideas to the broad categories of western thought, Spain apparently accepts that similarity of content and language indicates direct intellectual influence. In the course of two pages, Spain claims that "Calhoun drew from Aristotle the idea of natural inequality of individual men, added the idea of race inequality, and combined these with the German concept of progress through exploitation."<sup>12</sup> Now, these claims might conceivably be true, but Spain nowhere develops fully the connections. We know from his correspondence that Calhoun had a high regard for some of Aristot-



le's ideas, but we cannot say with certainty which ideas, if any, he derived directly from Aristotle. Calhoun's failure to specify his sources makes it difficult to know which, even, of Aristotle's works he read. Similarly, while Calhoun's idea of progress bears a striking resemblance to certain German ideas on the subject, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest, as Spain apparently does, that any direct influence exists.<sup>13</sup> It is well-recognised that the concept of influence, whilst it has proved an attractive and useful device in tracing the morphology of ideas, is itself open to grave theoretical objections when used loosely. The central difficulty lies in the way in which ideas are transmitted. Karl Mannheim has suggested that all thinking takes place within an inherited tradition and that when a particular writer brings his mind to bear on specific problems he participates in the process of thinking. The implication of Mannheim's suggestion is that the lineage of ideas does not come down in direct descent from one author to another but by a much more subtle process. Ideas, once they are given birth, are filtered down into the society that receives them, and over a process of time they become a part of the value-system of that society. There is, then, a very positive connection between ideas and social reality; an idea is only nourished and nurtured if it expresses the aspirations of society, and when it fails to do this it becomes replaced by other ideas. Sidney Pollard has eloquently reaffirmed the point: ideas, he writes, "arise in the minds of men who have experiences and social roles, and not only must they accord with those experiences and social roles, or they will

be rejected, but they will arise largely because of them.... ideas that do not accord with reality, as seen by contemporaries, will remain sterile and without influence."<sup>14</sup>

It follows from this that if the origins of ideas are to be fully grasped it is necessary to have some understanding of the intellectual milieu which gives them expression and force. But to say all this does not preclude the possibility that a particular political theorist, operating within a particular intellectual climate, might indeed have been influenced directly by a writer of an earlier period. What does need to be shown, when this is argued, is that there is a demonstrable causal connection between the two writers; similarity of content or expression is insufficient evidence because "The discovery that philosophers have used the same words, the same phrases, the same expression of ideals as are found in a political document is not a sound basis for the argument, even when an influence is probable, that the meanings are the same."<sup>15</sup> Quentin Skinner has proposed a rigorous formula which satisfies the most stringent requirements of evidence. For the claim that one writer was influenced by another to be valid, three rules must be observed: in the first place, there must be a genuine similarity between the ideas of the writers concerned. Second, it must be demonstrated that the writer who was supposedly influenced could not have found the ideas in any other writing. Finally, the "probability of the similarity being random should be very low." Skinner's rules constitute the minimum requirement for the establishing of influence.<sup>16</sup>

Skinner's procedure, whilst making it infinitely more



more difficult to establish direct influence, does avoid all the objections of the impressionistic approach which Spain's study seems to embody. Similarity of ideas, taken on its own, cannot stand as evidence of influence unless it is supplemented by subsidiary rules, but to be fair to Spain, he is not the only scholar to have committed this error: Charles M. Wiltse, author of the most painstakingly thorough biography of Calhoun, maintains that "Like the authors of the Federalist, Calhoun drew freely from Hobbes and Harrington and Locke...."<sup>17</sup> Wiltse, like Spain, relies on the similarity of ideas as evidence of influence and the same criticism applies to his claim. In fact, it is more likely that influence, if it exists in a direct form, would manifest itself in a negative sense. It is more plausible that one writer should react against what has been said by an earlier writer rather than to reaffirm the same point. It may be argued with some force that many of Calhoun's ideas in the Disquisition were influenced, in a negative sense, by the earlier ideas of Locke; this is particularly true of the self-conscious way in which Calhoun dismisses the concept of a state of nature.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the drawbacks of Spain's work, it remains the best introduction to Calhoun's political theory. Richard N. Current's volume, on the other hand, is less scholarly than Spain's and tends more in the direction of an interpretive essay. One important advantage it has, however, over Spain's work is that it attempted to evaluate the significance and influence of Calhoun's theory. This aspect, largely ignored by Spain, is surely an essential focus of interest for the historian of ideas. Current's



treatment of this area, however, is less satisfactory than other parts of the book. In the third part of the book, which he explicitly entitles "Significance and Influence", he manages to condense a potpourri of only tenuously related information, including an attack on Calhoun's use of logic (8 pages), an attempt to contrast Webster the Conservative with Calhoun the Reactionary (9 pages), a portrayal of Calhoun as a catalyst, converting Jeffersonian liberalism into Southern Reaction (10 pages), a description of the "Neo-Calhounism of the Twentieth Century" (12 pages) and finally, an attempt to characterise Calhoun's continuing relevance in terms of "defending, against external attack, institutions based upon a belief in human inequality." (5 pages).<sup>19</sup> What would have been of far greater value to the historian of ideas is an assessment of what Calhoun's theory meant for the people who read it. Admittedly, Current does cite documentary evidence in this regard, but it is sparse and unconvincing. Current does make the revealing comment: "With the coming of the crisis of 1860-61, however, Calhoun reemerged as a leading prophet (second only to Jefferson and Davis) of the disaffected Southerners."<sup>20</sup> If Calhoun's theory only "reemerges" in 1860, this suggests that during the 1850's very little attention was paid to it which, considering the dynamics of the sectional crisis, seems surprising. Current offers no explanation of why Calhoun's political theory should have been held in abeyance during this period.

The most striking conclusion of Current's research is the importance he attaches to the concept of class struggle in Calhoun's thought. Current argued that Calhoun's notion of

conflicting geographical interests could be applied to less well-defined social groupings, and maintained that Calhoun himself had applied it in such a way to capital and labour in his political speeches.<sup>21</sup> Calhoun was thus said to have "anticipated" many of the elements of the Marxist critique of capitalist society, though arriving at startlingly opposite conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

It is readily apparent that Calhoun's political writings and speeches may be construed in such a way, but it is of fundamental importance to discover whether Calhoun intended that such a construction should have been placed upon them. Since this raises the crucial question of how the political writings of a past age are to be properly understood, it is worthwhile considering this aspect in some detail and focusing on what are the gravest conceptual faults of both Spain and Current's work.

A man is considered a political theorist primarily because of the existence of a text he has written. That is, he has made some attempt to set down his thoughts in some systematic fashion and those thoughts are recoverable to us. This seems so obviously true as to be hardly worth mentioning; if the political texts of, say, Hobbes or Locke had not been written or if they had been lost, there would simply be no way of knowing that they were, or had been, political theorists.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, does not mean to say that they were not other things too. Peter Laslett has rightly described Locke as "a directive political influence in his own right and something of a public personality."<sup>24</sup> Locke's association with the Earl of Shaftesbury and



Lord Somers gave him some influence in the shaping of public policy, but it is quite clear that Locke's reputation today is as that of a philosopher and political theorist, and that that reputation is based almost exclusively on the existence of his texts.<sup>25</sup> The authorship of a text, then, is the first qualification of a political theorist.

Calhoun may be considered a political theorist for precisely this reason. His two texts, A Disquisition on Government and A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States, written during the last years of his life but not published until 1851, constitute an attempt to put into systematic form his political ideas. But the central difficulty in evaluating Calhoun's political theory lies in the fact that his status as a theorist is all but eclipsed by his stature as a politician of some eminence. Ralph Lerner has rightly maintained that scholars have "all failed to solve the peculiar problem of how to study and interpret the writing of a man of theory-and-practice."<sup>26</sup> The usual procedure, adopted by both *Spain* and *Current*, takes the form of examining Calhoun's texts in conjunction with his personal correspondence, political speeches and reports.<sup>27</sup> The conceptual implications of this approach are serious: *Spain*, and especially *Current*, assumed that to fully recover and understand Calhoun's theory, it was necessary to scour all the available documentary sources and to reconstruct the scattered remarks that Calhoun had made during the course of his career into systematic doctrines. This is an improper procedure for a number of reasons.

In the first place, this procedure does not take into

account the fact that Calhoun's letters and speeches were written over a period of forty years in which time his ideas, like the ideas of other men, changed and developed. By a skillful process of exegesis it is possible to collect all that he wrote on a given subject and to present it as a unified and monolithic structure; but this, of course, would be a pure distortion in the sense that the author, in writing his letters and in making his speeches, was acting with a specific intention each time he wrote and spoke. By collecting the scattered remarks made in letters and speeches, a writer cannot necessarily be made to accept that what he had written or said at various times is a faithful representation of his ideas. Calhoun in 1850, confronted with his admission in 1816 that the slave trade was an "odious traffic" and that slavery was at best a necessary evil, could not say that this was a true description of his views in 1850.<sup>28</sup> Letters and speeches properly treated can only indicate what an individual was thinking at a particular moment in time.<sup>29</sup>

The second, and equally compelling objection to this kind of method is that it enables the commentator to bring his own preconceptions to bear on the scattered remarks. With the benefit of historical perspective, it is possible to approach the writings of the past in such a way as to expect certain doctrines to have been elaborated by a writer, and when these fail to appear in the text to search personal correspondence for hints of them in order to impose some kind of intellectual coherence on them. It may well be that the nature of the exercise compels us to seek connections between the thoughts of



past thinkers and ourselves, for, as Quentin Skinner has written, "We must classify in order to understand, and we can only classify the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar."<sup>30</sup> The danger comes when we are tempted to make the unfamiliar conform to the familiar at any price. Current appears to have done precisely this by finding in Calhoun's writings references to the class struggle. Although he is not wrong to point out the similarity of ideas, he does give the erroneous impression that somehow Calhoun was deliberately contributing to thought on this subject which, since the idea did not exist in its Marxian sense, Calhoun could not possibly have intended to do.

There are, then, particular dangers associated with the method of attempting to reconstruct political theory from the letters and speeches of a writer. This does not imply, however, that an examination of such sources is inappropriate or unhelpful to the study of political theory. In The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, C.B. Macpherson has maintained that "where a writer can take it for granted that his readers will share some of his assumptions, he will see no need to set these out at the points in his argument where we, who do not share those assumptions automatically, think they should have been stated to make the argument complete."<sup>31</sup> Letters, speeches and personal diaries may be of great value in clarifying the way in which an author uses a particular word, and hence may contribute to a fuller understanding of his language in the text. Yet, it must be borne in mind that the same reservations apply to this enterprise as to that of reconstructing; language,



like ideas, changes over time, but with greater subtlety. Great care must be taken when using material which is external to the text, and should be regarded as being subsidiary to the main purpose of understanding the text.

If this sounds as though it is an argument in favour of textual autonomy, it is so only in a restricted sense and quite unlike the arguments of pure textualists. They would argue that the text is autonomous in the sense that no information external to the text is necessary for a full and complete understanding of that text. What I am arguing here is that the text should be the main focus of study and that all subsidiary enterprises -- such as examining extraneous evidence like letters, speeches -- and the social context -- should be geared to uncovering the proper meaning of the text. The text is therefore autonomous only in the sense that its clarification is the primary concern of the commentator. Why the text should have this special status over and above other political writings and utterances of the author is the subject of the next section.

## II

In the previous section, some of the general conceptual problems of studying political theory were discussed along with the more specific objections to the methods of existing Calhoun scholarship. In this section I propose to outline an

alternative procedure which, it is hoped, will avoid many of the limitations which these studies embody.

To begin with, it is necessary to examine the purpose of studying political theory and to clarify what political theorists think they are doing when they write on such matters. Andrew Hacker's contention that the function of political theory is to provide causal and ethical generalisations which transcend the context in which it is written, is often open to objection (mainly from political scientists) on the grounds that such an enterprise is non-verifiable by the political theorist concerned. It might be the case that the ethical and causal theories he propounds are true for all periods of history, but he can have no way of knowing it. The implicit assumption of this approach is that the causal and ethical relations among men are constant. And even if a particular political theorist believed, along with David Hume, that "there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human motives remain the same, in its principles and operations",<sup>32</sup> it does not follow that ethical statements are similarly constant. The problem is, according to critics of this approach, that normative ethical prescriptions are themselves tied to specific cultural contexts. Attempts, therefore, at reducing the theory of politics to a few universally valid principles is not a scientific enterprise, but a speculative one.<sup>33</sup>

This, however, does not imply that there is no value in studying political theory, or indeed in writing it, only that the things we hope to learn from it ought to be differently



conceived.<sup>34</sup> Even if there are no "timeless truths", political theory serves the function of illuminating our understanding of the ways in which particular individuals have grappled with the problems they have encountered in their social environment. Political theory then becomes a part of the process of historical understanding, and its texts become analagous to historical events. All the questions that historians seek to ask about past events become applicable to the texts of political theory: what were their causes, what did they contain, what were their consequences. And once these, so to speak, "micro-historical" preliminaries have been successfully tackled, the earnest process of assimilation and classification within the broad sweep of history can begin.

Viewed in this light, texts acquire a special significance over letters and speeches simply because they represent a self-conscious effort on the part of the author to systematise his ideas into a coherent whole. It is not impossible, in the absence of a political text, to take an individual's letters and speeches and to reconstruct into systematic doctrines the principles which informed his political actions, but the problems involved in this approach have been dealt with in the previous section. The crucial point is that such a reconstruction is almost bound to be a distortion precisely because letters and speeches embody a variety of partial intentions. Each letter written and each speech delivered must presumably have been the result of a specific intention on the author's part at a particular moment in time. To string all his scattered remarks together in such a way as to present them as a unified doctrine

would be misleading. We assume, of course, that there exists some measure of consistency in human beings, but frequently this is an overestimated quality; it is entirely possible that over the course of time an individual's ideas will change for perfectly honest reasons. But this point is of secondary importance; what is essential to grasp is that a text is the embodiment of a single, specific intention which the author wishes to communicate to his audience, while letters and speeches represent a multiplicity of intentions over a given period of time.

If what has been said so far is correct, then the superiority of a text over other documentary sources is decisively established. The author's decision to set down his political ideas in a systematic form arises from a particular intention to communicate something to his readers, and it follows that to gain a complete understanding of the text, it is necessary to uncover that intention. If we assume, as we must, that the intention to write the text is the result of a prior cause, then a grasp of the circumstances which give rise to the intention is not only proper, but essential. For a writer of a specifically political text, it is reasonable to suppose that the spur to his intention is some crisis, actual or perceived, within the society in which he lives. "Political theory", maintains Alan Grimes, "is born out of the conflicts in a society or between societies, out of the struggle between the 'is' and the 'ought'. It is politics - the contest for authority - distilled and articulated into systematic thought."<sup>35</sup> If Grimes is right in his contention that political theory is an abstracted



and systematised form of practical politics, this points to a very sharp distinction between political theory and political philosophy which has been well-defined by Thomas P. Jenkin.<sup>36</sup> Political philosophy, he maintains, aims at discovering truth; the impetus behind its writing lies in its intention to uncover the true political relations among men. It is not interested in persuading men to accept a particular ideological point of view, except insofar as it testifies to the coherence of its own intellectual system. The role of the political philosopher, then, is that of a detached observer attempting to identify constancies in human behaviour and portraying them as universal truths. He is optimistic in the sense that he believes that man, like the universe in which he lives, can ultimately be explained in terms of a few general principles which may be discovered by use of the human mind.

Political theory, on the other hand, does contain a persuasive element. It has its roots in, and is usually a response to the current political environment. It should not be seen simply as ideology because it seeks to offer a rational justification of political behaviour based on supposedly true generalisations. It differs from political philosophy, above all, in its intention which is to persuade men that a particular course of action is desirable or preferable, and then to show why it is desirable or preferable. Unlike the political philosopher, the political theorist does not concern himself with cosmic speculations (or if he does, it is only incidental); his purpose is firmly rooted in the present.

If such a qualitative difference exists between political

philosophy and political theory, it is often difficult to detect in practice. John Locke, it was argued earlier, is known equally as a philosopher of knowledge (from the Essay Concerning Human Understanding) and as a political theorist (from the Two Treatises of Government), yet it seems clear that many of his philosophical ideas developed in response to specific questions of public policy.<sup>37</sup> Similarly with Thomas Hobbes; John Plamenatz has argued that "If England had remained domestically at peace, he [Hobbes] might never have written his two master works, De Cive and Leviathan, and might have devoted his mind entirely to other branches of philosophy and to classical scholarship."<sup>38</sup> Yet, even if Hobbes' political texts were prompted by immediate events, it is not clear from their presentation that they should be regarded as guides to action rather than philosophical inquiries. It is only when they are taken in conjunction with his later works that their function appears hortatory.<sup>39</sup>

It follows from this that before we can even begin to decide whether a political text is philosophical or theoretical, it is necessary to recover the author's intention. The proper procedure must therefore include an examination of the circumstances and context in which it was conceived and written. Calhoun's political texts were written at a time when the United States was undergoing a critical social and political upheaval; the American South, increasingly conscious of its status as a permanent minority within the Union, and fearing a threat to its social and economic institutions, developed a series of arguments which it employed in its own defence.



Calhoun's Disquisition and Discourse have conventionally been viewed against this background, and it has seemed reasonable that they should be. However, if it can be established that Calhoun's intention to write the texts springs from the tensions engendered by the sectional crisis - that is, if the crisis of the Union acts as a prior cause to Calhoun's intention to write the texts - it does not follow that the texts themselves are successfully explained. The tendency to accept that once one has uncovered the cause of an event or an utterance, then one has discovered the true meaning of it, is erroneous in that it takes no account of the purpose of that event or utterance. This is a difficult point which ought to be spelled out in more detail.

If we establish that Calhoun wrote the Disquisition and the Discourse as a result of the sectional crisis, all we can possibly know (without actually reading the texts) is that the crisis was the cause of Calhoun's intention to write. We might know, or suspect, from other sources what Calhoun's position might be, but we cannot know exactly what Calhoun's intention in writing the texts was unless we read the texts themselves and take careful note of their content. This is the case because the texts themselves are acts of communication, embodying Calhoun's intention to be understood in a particular way by his intended audience. Thus, the proper sphere of analysis for the commentator is not either the context or the text taken individually, but both together. The context may explain the existence of the text, but the text itself is the result of a specific intention of the author; to gain a complete understanding of

the text requires not only an analysis of the ideas it contains but also of the format in which they are presented. Presumably, there was a range of communications open to the author and it is pertinent to inquire why the particular format he chose should have fulfilled his needs better than any other mode of communication. Why, for example, did Calhoun feel that an abstract treatise on government would fulfil his intention better than a speech in the Senate? And why, once he had decided to use the written word as his medium, did he eschew the conventional pamphlet form? And again, what possible significance can the peculiar juxtaposition of his ideas contained in the texts have? The answers to all these questions bring us nearer to a complete recovery of Calhoun's intentions and hence to a fuller understanding of the texts.

If all this seems to be labouring the point excessively, it is so only because it is of fundamental importance in understanding political texts generally. I agree strenuously with Quentin Skinner who has argued that this method ought not to be accepted as an aesthetic preference, but as a matter of conceptual propriety.<sup>40</sup> The point is, above all, one of logic: when an author sits down to write something he does so with a specific intention in mind, and further, he intends that that intention should be understood by his audience. The recovery of these intentions, therefore, must be the starting point of any discussion of his writings, if they are to be properly understood. Much of the study of political theory is characterised by criticism of authors on the grounds that they "failed" to address themselves to questions which we think they ought.



to have dealt with. But the point is clear that no author can be criticised on these grounds unless it can be established that he had a prior intention to treat of those subjects. It is perfectly permissible to criticise what he has written and the form of words he has used to express what he has written, because he has a special responsibility for his actions and utterances. But underlying his actions (indeed, all conscious human actions) is an intention which must be uncovered if what he has written is to be judged fairly.<sup>41</sup>

Of course, it is entirely possible, maybe even common, that an author's intention to be understood has, in fact, been misunderstood by his audience, and yet it remains a significant statement. In what sense can this misunderstanding be said to be a "meaning"? Clearly, to the people who believe it, it must be important and relevant to the society in which they live otherwise it would have been discarded as being inapplicable. The misunderstanding might have arisen because the author's choice of words was imprecise and ambiguous; in this instance the author's intention to be understood has been unsuccessfully executed and he may be criticised on these grounds. But it would be logically improper to hold that the misunderstood construction placed on the text was, in fact, the "real" meaning of it. The real meaning of a text can only be defined in terms of the author's intention to be understood, and it is the business of the commentator to clarify this intention. This does not imply that a misconstrued text is any less meaningful, only that the meaning attached to it by its audience is not the meaning intended by its author. Once this is grasped it becomes



clear that two separate processes of understanding are necessary for describing and analysing a text - a recovery of the original intention of the author and an assessment of the meaning ascribed by others to the words he has written.<sup>42</sup>

The uncovering of an author's intention, then, is of first importance in understanding the texts of political theory and serves as an essential preliminary procedure before other questions which have traditionally been the concern of students of political theory, can be answered. In the next section, I shall examine some of the ways in which a political text may be evaluated once the intention of the author has been fully grasped.

### III

In The Problems of Political Philosophy, D.D.Raphael suggested that the purpose of political philosophy and theory was to provide a rational justification for beliefs.<sup>43</sup> It is, of course, not a necessary condition that for a belief to be held that it should be rationally defensible and there are many examples of such beliefs. It might be argued that a belief in the existence of God, though held by many millions of people, relies not on any rational grounds, but on faith. But this in no way diminishes the potency of the belief to those who hold it.<sup>44</sup> The essential importance of beliefs, whether rationally or irrationally held, lies in their ability to direct and deter-

mine the behaviour of individuals. If we accept the distinction between political philosophy and political theory outlined in the previous section, it becomes clear that a political theorist is concerned especially with the modification of behaviour. It is central to his purpose, therefore, that he should offer convincing rational grounds for persuading his audience that what he writes is true. Any evaluation of a political text must, then, take the form of examining the propositions and conclusions it contains on logical grounds.

The first criterion of philosophical quality is consistency. If it can be shown that a theory contains logical fallacies and inconsistencies, it is reasonable to suppose that the theory ought to be rejected on these grounds. (I say "reasonable to suppose" because quite clearly this is not always the case in political theory; scholars maintain that the logical basis of Marx's political theory is faulty, but this has not prevented it from exercising immense influence all over the world.<sup>45</sup>) In establishing the coherence of a theory the gravest difficulty involves the identification of the author's unstated assumptions. If the argument in the text does not seem to follow logically from the original premises, the commentator ought to ask what stage of the argument is missing and why. If it can be conclusively shown that the author felt no need to state his assumptions on this point because he felt that it would have been clear to his audience, then the theory ought to survive the examination.

Once a theory is established as being internally consistent, it may be said to offer a rational justification for the beliefs it seeks to defend. This alone, however, is insufficient grounds



for establishing the superiority of one theory over another. It might be the case that two theories, both internally coherent, but embodying diametrically opposite conclusions, are pitted against one another. If we assume that the theories of Locke and Hobbes are consistent in their internal structures, then both would be acceptable as justifying the beliefs each seeks to defend. Both theorists, beginning with the state of nature, come to quite different conclusions about the type of government that ought to be instituted - which, then, ought to be rejected? The problem is that each theory seeks to defend certain values, not facts. In cases about matters of fact, the belief must not only be consistent, but true; thus, scientific theories remain tenable only until they are supplanted by new theories which account for all the observable data. The principle of falsifiability, therefore, applies in the case of scientific theorising.<sup>46</sup> But in the philosophy of practice, which is concerned with evaluating values not facts, the process is more difficult. Ultimately, there is no way in which a value can be falsified because its existence depends on subjective factors personal to the individual.

In spite of this, it is possible to go some way towards evaluating a political theory on grounds other than consistency. Even if the values embodied in a normative political theory are ultimately unassailable on logical grounds, it is rare that a theorist will make no use whatever of facts to support his value-judgements. In that instance, the facts used in evidence to buttress the values become liable to be tested by accordance.<sup>47</sup> Hence, if a political principle depends on a factual assumption, the principle may be overthrown if the facts can be shown to be



false. Calhoun, for instance, bases his theory of government on the supposed fact that the main motivating force of human behaviour is self-interest.\* If that principle can be shown to be false, then we would be justified in giving less credence to the theory of government. The essential difficulty with this approach is that human behaviour is sufficiently varied that no amount of evidence can conclusively demonstrate the primacy of one principle over another because, quite simply, it can always be countered with contrary evidence. It might be argued that the preoccupation of the social contract writers with the state of nature falls into this category. It seems clear that Hobbes' conception of a pre-social state<sup>of nature</sup> was not meant to be literally construed as an historical reality, but rather as a logical necessity to the theory he propounds.<sup>48</sup> Locke, on the other hand, is more explicit (though not conclusive) that his notion of the state of nature ought to be taken both as an historical truism and a moral necessity. Both Locke and Hobbes survive the dilemma because it is not demonstrably true that no state of nature existed in actuality.<sup>49</sup>

In evaluating a political text the principles of accordance and consistency are essential, but they are not the only criteria which are used to judge the quality of a work. A theorist may be worthy of consideration on the grounds that his text contains original ideas. Originality, however, like consistency, is often an overestimated quality. Michael Levin has aptly pointed out that the nature of political theory "is such that originality is hardly to be expected in terms of unit

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\* See Chapter Six below.

ideas, for all writers operate within a tradition of concern, social assumptions and methods of explanation. What can elevate the significance of a theorist is not so much the novelty of his ideas as the novel manner in which he combines, arranges or juxtaposes them. It is the shifting emphasis rather than total novelty that is the most we can reasonably expect." 50

If this is the case, we are able to appreciate in Calhoun's texts the shifts in emphasis of certain commonplace ideas. His combination of two apparently opposing strands of thought in his theory of human nature and his treatment of natural law concepts contain many ideas which would have been familiar to his contemporaries; but it is his peculiar juxtaposition of these ideas which makes Calhoun an interesting, and even original, thinker. Furthermore, if we accept this criterion of originality, the charge of eclecticism - which is invariably an accusation - evaporates entirely.<sup>51</sup>

So far, we have discussed the various ways in which the text can be evaluated, as it were, internally. But it is certainly the case that other types of questions, equally important, may be asked about the text, and which require for answers, the use of different techniques. One of the main preoccupations of the conventional study of political theory is with locating a particular text or thinker within a particular category of political thought. Both history and the history of ideas have evolved certain categories by which similarities and differences between writers may be emphasised: thus Burke becomes classified under the heading of Conservatism, Mill under Liberalism, Descartes under Rationalism and Locke under Empiricism. But this approach which is primarily designed to aid our comprehension, has,



as Levin has reminded us, several dangers. In the first place, categories "whose status ought to be suggestive, become accepted as accurate descriptive frameworks" and this in turn can lead to distortion. By classifying Mill under Liberalism, for example, we run the risk of oversimplifying his thought to the point where it becomes misrepresented. Levin rightly points out that Mill's Liberalism has its reservations, particularly when confronted by the claims of society over the rights of individuals.<sup>52</sup> Philosophical categorisations serve the same purpose as historical ones, and the same dangers apply. Thus Locke, whom we cited above as an Empiricist, is grossly parodied by the label which underestimates entirely the a priori content of his thought.<sup>53</sup>

Another, and related, danger of this process is that there is a tendency to impute to certain thinkers ideas which are suggested by our own post hoc categories. Thus, if we classify Calhoun as a "fabulous reactionary" (as Richard Hofstadter does<sup>54</sup>) there may be the temptation to devalue the other elements of his thought or, worse, to assume that he could not possibly have written anything which might be relevant to a nominally Liberal society. At that point, Levin maintains, our categories become more real than the material they seek to classify. Moreover, we sometimes tend to forget the nature of our classifications by assuming that a particular writer was intending to contribute directly to a well-defined school of thought.<sup>55</sup>

Bearing these dangers in mind, it is necessary to attempt to locate Calhoun in some tradition of thought, not as an end in itself, but as an aid to comprehension. Calhoun, it will be argued, poses a particular problem of categorisation in that his theory seems to contain elements of Burkean conservatism



and Lockean liberalism. This is not necessarily a contradiction, however, if "conservatism" is defined strictly as an attitude towards change. Samuel P. Huntington has maintained that there is no conflict in arguing that a writer may be conservative about Liberal ideals.<sup>56</sup> Louis Hartz in The Liberal Tradition in America has put forward a more extreme version of this thesis. Hartz maintains that Calhoun, along with George Fitzhugh and other proslavery writers, formed what he termed the "Reactionary Enlightenment".<sup>57</sup> Calhoun's theory, Hartz explains, embodies two contradictory elements: the need to defend the institution of human slavery in the Southern states led Calhoun to ground the theory on an organic conception of society, while the equally important need to defend the South within the structure of the Union led him to construct a series of mechanical devices for its defence. The result, according to Hartz, leaves Calhoun as a "profoundly disintegrated political theorist."<sup>58</sup> Hartz's comments on Calhoun's political theory are perceptive and his concept of the "Reactionary Enlightenment" forms the conceptual basis of the second part of this study. We shall, in Chapter Three, be examining the paradoxical nature of the "Reactionary Enlightenment" as an intellectual categorisation prior to examining its validity in relation to Calhoun's Disquisition on Government.

Before that, however, the injunction that to fully understand an author's texts one must recover his intentions, must be attended to. Although Calhoun protested continually that his loyalties were to the South first and then to the Union,<sup>59</sup> he strives in his theory to serve both causes equally. Indeed, it is possible to argue that his theory suffers precisely because

of his attachment to the Union; had he been able to release himself from the self-imposed obligation of protecting the South within the Union, as Fitzhugh later did, his theory might have been spared some of the more glaring inconsistencies. If there is anything tragic about Calhoun's thought and career it is this, that he attempted to reconcile the irreconcilable.

In the following chapter we shall attempt to recover Calhoun's intentions in writing the texts by examining and assessing evidence which is extraneous to the texts themselves. Following a brief introduction in which the main issues raised by Calhoun scholars are surveyed, we shall trace the history of the composition of the texts, taking into account events which were occurring concurrently in the political arena and which may have affected their final form. It should be noted at this point that although the title of this study indicates that the focus of our attention will be on the ideas of the Disquisition on Government, any historical account of its composition cannot be legitimately separated from that of the Discourse. This is simply the case because, as I hope to show in the next chapter, Calhoun conceived the texts as being related in intention, though not in function. The Discourse deals almost exclusively with what may be termed "constitutional" theory, as opposed to the "political" theory of the Disquisition, and this serves as a justification for treating the ideas contained in the Disquisition separately.\*

The third section of the next chapter is devoted to an

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\* This is argued in greater detail in Chapter Three, section one, "The Reactionary Enlightenment" below.



attempt to evaluate the relation of the Disquisition and the Discourse to the bulk of Southern writing of the period which, scholars maintain, was overwhelmingly proslavery in outlook.<sup>60</sup> The fourth and fifth section are concerned with identifying Calhoun's intended audience and attempting to assess their influence on the people who read them. By and large, biographers of Calhoun have made little serious attempt to estimate the reception of his texts beyond making impressionistic, and sometimes unwarranted, deductions. Margaret L. Coit, for example, maintains that "it is not difficult to surmise" how wide an audience the texts received in the South, while the North "had no desire to read or heed the warnings of the vanquished."<sup>61</sup> Coit's interpretation might be true, but without the presentation of firm evidence it remains nothing more than an unjustified assertion. It might be expected that the texts would have appealed particularly to a Southern audience during the 1850s, yet references in diaries and letters of the period offer scant evidence of this. Jesse T. Carpenter has hinted that by the 1850s Calhoun's notion of the concurrent majority as a solution to the sectional conflict had been rendered obsolete.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that even Calhoun's closest friends and political allies were never wholly convinced of the efficacy of the concurrent majority as a Southern defence mechanism.<sup>63</sup> And what of the North? Gerald M. Capers believes that the texts were written specifically to convince a Northern audience of the South's determination to insist on her rights under the Constitution.<sup>64</sup> If that is the case, it is reasonable to expect that the North would have paid some attention to what he had written. Or did Calhoun suffer the ignominy of being ignored,



as other Southern writers were?<sup>65</sup>

The essential problem in evaluating Calhoun's significance as a political theorist lies in the fact, which we touched on earlier, that he was an immensely influential politician. Much of the argument of his Discourse was presented in, and foreshadowed by, his political speeches which were extensively reported throughout the Union. The mechanics of the concurrent majority, moreover, were implied during the South Carolina Nullification Crisis in the early 1830s. It is possible, even likely, that many Americans knew of the essential components of his constitutional theory, at least, without having to read the political texts; if that is true, then the status of the texts is established not by virtue of their intrinsic value, but by the political reputation of their author.

## Chapter Two: The Writing of the Disquisition and Discourse

### (a) Introduction

In the previous chapter an alternative methodology was outlined for the understanding of political texts, based on the comments of Quentin Skinner. It was argued that an evaluation of a text requires, as an indispensable preliminary exercise, that the student gains a grasp of the intention or intentions of the author in writing it. Such an investigation, if it is successfully performed, would necessarily include an account of the social and political forces which occasioned, in the mind of the author, the intention to write the text along with an account of the author's intention in writing it. Clarifying and establishing these intentions at the outset would, it was argued, avoid the possibility of reading into the texts ideas which the author could not have intended to convey, and hence reduce the likelihood of distortion. It was not advocated that this procedure should supplant the traditional methods of treating political texts, only that it should be used as an essential and complementary tool in uncovering the meaning of a text as it was conceived by its author. Once the author's intentions have been fully grasped, the ideas he articulates become subject to the usual processes of critical analysis and assessment.

This procedure, it seems to me, is singularly appropriate for studying Calhoun's political texts, A Disquisition on Government and A Discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States. One of the central difficulties in evaluating these texts, I hinted earlier, was that of unravelling Calhoun's



influence as a national statesman from his work as a political theorist. The question arises as to what extent we are justified in making such a division. It was not a distinction that Thomas Hart Benton was inclined to make when he announced to the Senate in 1850: "My people cannot distinguish between a man and his principles - between a traitor and treason. They cannot eulogize the one and denounce the other."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, from the perspective of the historian of ideas it is a necessary distinction and for this reason: the existence of a political text denotes that a man has self-consciously determined, for whatever purpose, to set down his ideas about politics and that he intends that text to perform a specific function. The very choice of a text as the format in which to present his ideas suggests that the author believed that the function he envisaged it as performing could not be successfully accomplished through any other medium. For a man who was actively engaged in politics, as Calhoun was, it is reasonable to conclude that the parliamentary process was not an appropriate forum in which to articulate the ideas he sets down in the text. The division, then, between Calhoun's role as a politician and as a theorist is not one which historians have imposed on him, but one which he has appropriated for himself.

Having said that, it is not at all clear that historians (whether of ideas or otherwise) have been able to achieve so clinical a division. Existing studies of Calhoun's political theory have been heavily coloured by preconceptions derived from his political career, which in turn have relied on contemporary comments and perceptions. In an age of political conflict

and increasing sectional tension, powerful passions were unleashed; there was a tendency to portray political allies and opponents in stark terms - black and white, hero and anti-hero. Calhoun, standing in the forefront of national politics, became a symbol to both North and South, always characterised in extreme terms. In September 1863 - a full thirteen years after Calhoun's death - the young Englishman Henry Yates Thompson recorded in his diary a conversation with Professor Fisher of Yale in which Fisher referred to Calhoun as the "father of all lies". The allusion is biblical - St. John's Gospel refers to the devil as the "father of lies" - and since Fisher was Professor of Divinity, the insult could hardly have been unintended.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia, writing to Lewis E. Harvie in March 1876, recorded the dilemma he found himself faced with. Hunter, deeply impoverished during the Civil War, had been asked by Calhoun's family to lay aside a book he was then working on and to undertake instead a biography of the dead statesman:

What shall I do? If I undertake it my book is postponed for a long time if not indefinitely. If I can complete it, the book would sell for something and in my circumstances I feel bound to eke out my scanty means of subsistence by the use of my pen. On the other hand no life of Mr. Calhoun which I could write would sell, so much is he maligned and misunderstood at present. Yet I am not willing that his life and works should be presented to the world by an indifferent or unfriendly hand.... I am anxious to vindicate myself and my friends especially Mr. Calhoun but if I do I shall die as poor as I am living and very unpopular. 3

Historical discussions of both Calhoun's political career



and his political theory have, to a greater or lesser extent, been unable to distance themselves from the heat of contemporary passion. This is, perhaps, an unavoidable outcome of all historical writing, but it nonetheless continues to obscure a proper understanding of Calhoun's political texts. It is true that some twentieth century scholars have tended to view the texts in a more favourable light than their nineteenth century counterparts,<sup>4</sup> so much so that Louis Hartz was led to describe Calhoun as "the philosophic darling of students of American political thought, the man who is invariably advanced when a thinker of European stature is called for in the American tradition."<sup>5</sup> Hartz may well have overstated the case, for while Calhoun's texts have commanded considerable respect, even from their critics, their true significance continues to be debated. Broadly speaking, interpretations of Calhoun's political thought fall into two conflicting categories.<sup>6</sup> The first, and older, view was stated by one of Calhoun's earliest biographers, Hermann Von Holst. Von Holst, writing in the 1880s, with the Civil War still fresh in his mind, maintained that the Disquisition and the Discourse "will always remain among the most curious books of the political literature of the United States." There is little doubt from the whole tenor of Von Holst's book, that he regarded the texts as conforming to his monolithic interpretation of Calhoun as being obsessed with slavery. Von Holst maintained that Calhoun was "the representative of an idea.... From about 1830 to the day of his death, Calhoun may be called the very impersonation of the slavery question." Von Holst's conviction that Calhoun was "the greatest and purest of proslavery fanatics"

has been mitigated by subsequent scholars, but nevertheless they have continued to evaluate the texts against the background of proslavery writing.<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1966, J.L.Thomas maintained that "whatever new meanings Calhoun's political theory may have acquired in our own day, it was originally offered and for three decades served as a formidable defense of the institution of slavery."<sup>8</sup> The connection between the texts and the issue of slavery, then, is a well-established theme in the scholarly literature. It assumes that they were written specifically to defend the South's peculiar institution, and beyond that to establish the principle of minority privilege.

The alternative interpretation, represented by Margaret L.Coit and August O.Spain, view the Disquisition and the Discourse as being major contributions to democratic theory. Margaret Coit expressed the extreme version of this when she wrote that the texts were "perhaps the most powerful defense of minority rights in a democracy ever written."<sup>9</sup> The assumption underlying this point of view is that even if the texts were occasioned by the need to defend slavery, they nevertheless pinpoint with unerring accuracy a crucial and unresolved flaw in democratic theory and practice. The problem of maintaining the rights of a minority against the unrestrained power of a majority was one which had been inadequately treated by political theorists. The Lockean formula, whereby "the Body politic should move that way whither the greater force carries it", had proved in practice to be an increasingly unsatisfactory means of protection for dissenting minorities.<sup>10</sup> To the South-



ern mind, an unbroken chain of political and fiscal measures had suggested that the North was determined to deprive Southerners of their property and their livelihood; it was against this form of constitutional tyranny that Calhoun was directing his theory. August O. Spain concluded that Calhoun's solution to the problem was in many ways "unanswerable".<sup>11</sup>

The divergence of scholarly opinion concerning the true significance of Calhoun's political theory exemplifies exactly the difficulty of placing Calhoun within a particular tradition or category of thought. So stark is the contrast between the two interpretations that it is hardly surprising that a degree of confusion has resulted. The two views are incompatible because they approach Calhoun from different frameworks of reference. If we were to accept the Von Holst view that the real significance of the texts is their attempt to defend slavery and that Calhoun's ultimate concern was to provide a rationalisation of that institution, we cannot logically accept that the theory applies to all minorities at all times and in all places. The protection of minorities has traditionally been the peculiar preoccupation of liberal-democratic frames of reference and arises from the inadequacy of the Lockean prescriptions described above. If Calhoun's texts are tied specifically to slavery, both in intention and in substance, they cannot be adapted to suit other situations. This is what has confused scholars more than anything else: Calhoun appears to be utilising liberal mechanisms and liberal discourse to confound the liberal teleology they are designed to serve. In his appeal to minority rights he is appropriating liberal terminology to

defend a profoundly illiberal institution. If the incompatibility of interpretation is striking, it is at least understandable because it is only a reflection of the deep paradox in Calhoun's thought itself.<sup>12</sup>

In the light of this confusion over the true significance of Calhoun's political texts, it is necessary to consider once more the possible ways in which their meaning may be clarified. Much of the confusion has arisen because scholars have paid insufficient attention to uncovering Calhoun's intention in writing the texts. The recovery of an author's intention or intentions is essentially an historical exercise. A straightforward reading of the texts themselves is an obvious and indispensable first step, but it is insufficient itself because there is a tendency to approach the texts with a series of preconceived ideas which have been gained from other sources. The mental set of the commentator will predispose him to assimilate evidence which buttresses these preconceptions and to give less weight to contrary evidence. This tendency is well-recognised in all forms of scholarly writing, and whilst it is perhaps too much to expect an individual to be able to divest himself of all preconceptions, an awareness of the difficulty ought to encourage a more positive approach.

In attempting to gain an understanding of an author's intention it remains to be considered at this point as to what counts as evidence. The most convincing form of evidence is a clear and unequivocal statement by the author of what he was intending to convey by writing his texts. In the case of Calhoun, we are fortunate in having a series of letters written



over the period in which the texts were composed. This correspondence throws considerable light on Calhoun's intentions and it is curious that scholars have failed to make the best use of it as a source. Of course, in taking account of his letters we must allow the possibility that Calhoun may not have expressed his motives honestly, or even that he was unable to do so. This poses a considerable philosophical dilemma which covers all kinds of documentary evidence and from which there is no easy way out. Ultimately, we must assume that when an author gives an account of what he is doing, he is expressing to the best of his ability his belief that he is, in fact, performing that action in that particular way. To assume the opposite, it seems to me, is even more fraught with conceptual danger for if historians, in seeking to explain actions and utterances, eschew documentary evidence in favour of "plausible hypotheses", their results, however interesting or convincing, must be open to question. This is not to deny that ultimately all historical explanations take the form of plausible hypotheses, only that the hypotheses they arrive at must be based on solid evidence and must not be a substitute for it.<sup>13</sup>

In examining letters and documents, one must also concede the possibility that the author may have had a variety of multiple intentions which it is impossible to rank in a clear-cut order. And similarly, if a text is written over an extended period of time, as Calhoun's texts were, we must take into account the possibility that there may have been a shift in the priority of intentions in response to the author's perception of events. All this, of course, assumes that there is a delicate

interplay between the author's perception of social reality and his motives in writing. I say "delicate" because this too is fraught with danger. It is tempting to conclude that an author's intentions change or shift in priority in conformity with events, actual or perceived, in the real world. It is not at all clear, however, that this is a proper way to understand the process. Historians, operating with the benefit of hindsight necessarily not available to the actors involved, may too easily ascribe to them motives which conform to a subsequent interpretation of events. Thus, it may be argued that Calhoun's intention in writing the texts becomes more directly related to his fears over the deepening sectional crisis of the 1840s, an eminently plausible view in the light of what we know occurred in the 1850s and 1860s. But it is not clear that this was so from Calhoun's perspective. It is therefore important to pay especial attention to his letters in order to gauge his precise intentions.

Other less direct, though equally important, evidence may aid us in this enterprise. A word has already been said about the format in which Calhoun's ideas were presented and this may serve as an example of what I mean. Presumably when Calhoun conceived the project of writing the texts, there was a variety of forms available to him in which he could have expressed his ideas. His deliberate decision to utilise the form of an abstract treatise of political theory suggests that his intentions could not have been satisfactorily performed in any other way. We may reasonably conclude from this that his purpose in writing the texts was substantially different from his purpose in, say, making a speech in the Senate. What precisely those intent-



ions were may be gauged from considering the function conventionally performed by abstract statements of political theory within the society in which Calhoun lived.<sup>14</sup> It has been said that Calhoun's texts are unique in the sense that no American author before him had undertaken the task of evolving a systematic theory of politics. Admittedly, the writers of the Federalist papers had engaged in deep discussions on the nature of man, society and government, but they were addressing themselves to the specific proposals contained in the draft of the federal Constitution, and although their discussions led them to consider the first principles of politics, their primary purpose was polemical. Similarly, although the texts of John Taylor of Caroline purport to be dispassionate and reflective works of political theory, they are too closely allied to the polemics of Jeffersonian republicanism.<sup>15</sup> One of the main problems, then, in determining the conventional function of abstract political theory in the early history of the United States is the apparent lack of material.

The substance of the remainder of this chapter is concerned with examining evidence which may help us in determining Calhoun's intentions in writing the Disquisition and Discourse. The evidence of written documents, the format of the texts and the conventional styles of writing on political subjects should lead us to a more complete understanding of what Calhoun wished to communicate to his audience.

(b) The Composition of the Texts

It is difficult to establish with accuracy when Calhoun first conceived the idea of writing the Disquisition and the Discourse. The earliest reference he makes to the enterprise is a casual one in a letter to Francis Wharton in December 1843, but there is evidence to suggest that the project had been on his mind for some considerable time before that.<sup>16</sup> A week before his letter to Wharton, Calhoun received a communication from his political ally Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia in which Hunter had expressed a sense of anticipation over Calhoun's "contemplated book".<sup>17</sup> Hunter must therefore have had some foreknowledge of Calhoun's intention to write the texts. But even before that - a good fifteen months before - there were rumours that Calhoun was intending to write something on political economy. In the fall of 1842, Robert Barnwell Rhett had informed Senator Roane of Virginia that Calhoun was preparing himself for such a project and Roane took the opportunity of questioning the South Carolinian about it when he visited him a month later. Calhoun discussed the project openly with Roane who later reported to Van Buren that the finished product would be "John Taylor of Caroline with metaphysical variations."<sup>18</sup>

Calhoun's decision to write the texts was the result of a variety of causes which tended to reinforce one another. By far the most potent of these was Calhoun's acute awareness of the threat of abolitionist attacks on the South's peculiar institution. Throughout the latter half of the 1830s, the efforts of the radical abolitionists to make the extinction of slavery the central issue of American politics were manifested in attempts to lay antislavery petitions before Congress and to flood the



South with so-called incendiary literature.<sup>19</sup> On both issues Calhoun had taken a strong stand, arguing that any action on Congress's part was beyond its constitutional competence. For Congress even to receive the antislavery petitions, Calhoun maintained, was tantamount to a tacit acceptance of its ultimate authority to act in the matter and this would be but a small step to assuming authority in deciding the ultimate fate of the institution.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, he opposed the federal government's attempt to prevent incendiary literature being disseminated in the South by means of the U.S. mails on the grounds that such action belonged constitutionally to the individual states of the Union.<sup>21</sup> The efforts of the abolitionists and their Congressional supporters in the 1830s, however, failed to make a significant impression on the agenda of politics. Except on the Gag Rule of 1836, national party lines were not seriously disrupted and both in the North and South the abolitionists' attempt to polarise the sections was singularly unsuccessful.<sup>22</sup> It was Southern complacency, induced by this situation, which worried Calhoun particularly. During a speech on the reception of abolitionist petitions in March 1836, he warned the South that the spirit of abolitionism would not lie down and die.<sup>23</sup> By the 1840s Calhoun's prophecy was being borne out. In the congressional debates over the settlement of the western territories, the abolitionist impulse reared its head in a way which was terrifying to the South. Northern attempts to restrict the extension of slavery into the western territories galvanised the South into active opposition to the measure; the hardheaded discussions over the settlement of the territories did more to polarise the sections than the largely academic debates of the

1830s.<sup>24</sup>

The dangerous course of these events made Calhoun acutely aware of the lack of a sound theoretical exposition of the American system of government, which incorporated the Southern viewpoint of the Constitution. In December 1840, he wrote to A.D.Wallace:

There is no satisfactory work extant on our system of government. The Federalist is the fullest and, in many respects, the best, but it takes many false views and by no means goes to the bottom of the system. The Virginia and Kentucky resolutions and the report to the Virginia Legislature by Mr. Madison on the Alien and Sedition Acts take far deeper and more correct views, but are less full. The South Carolina controversy with the General Government develops and carries out those views more fully, but have never been collected and can only be found in scattered pamphlets and essays. I regard Story's Commentaries as essentially false and dangerous. 25

Calhoun's desire to combat the pernicious doctrines of the abolitionists and the false constitutional interpretations of Northern jurists was the most powerful influence in his decision to write the Disquisition and the Discourse.

At whatever moment in time Calhoun decided definitely to write the texts, it is clear that the work could not begin on them in earnest until the pressure of public business had eased. On November 27 1842, Calhoun submitted his resignation as Senator from South Carolina to both Houses of Congress "to take effect at the close of the present Congress, the 4th March next".<sup>26</sup> Charles Wiltse maintains that it was after his retirement from the Senate in March 1843 that Calhoun began working on the texts.<sup>27</sup> If this is the case, Calhoun remains curiously



silent on the matter in his personal correspondence. Furthermore, Calhoun's indication to Francis Wharton in December 1843 that he may write something if he could find the leisure, seems to suggest that his vague and casual intention to write had not yet crystallised into a firm decision. Less than three months later, however, Calhoun was using his work on the texts as an excuse for not accepting the appointment as Secretary of State following the death of Abel Upshur.<sup>28</sup> Evidently his researches did not pose an insuperable objection to his accepting the position, for precisely one week later he did exactly that.<sup>29</sup>

Between March 1844 and March 1845, Calhoun had little time for further work on the texts. During this period, he was engaged in delicate negotiations over the annexation of Texas which his predecessor had initiated. In his letter of acceptance to President Tyler, Calhoun had stipulated as a condition that he be allowed to resume private life after the successful negotiation of the Texas treaty, though when Polk became President in March 1845 he was disappointed at not being asked to remain in office.<sup>30</sup> Throughout his period as Secretary of State, Calhoun was thinking deeply, if intermittently, about the texts; indeed, the activities of English abolitionists and their American counterparts in the wrangling over Texas, made the completion of the texts a matter of added urgency. Francis Wharton reported a conversation with Calhoun in February 1845 in which he referred to "concurrent majorities" being the essence of the constitution.<sup>31</sup> Within a month of leaving office, Calhoun had recommenced work on the texts with a vengeance. On April 12, he was able to tell Charles Jared Ingersoll of his overall plan of the work:

it was to consist of "an inquiry into the elements of political science, preliminary to a treatise on the Constitution of the U.States."<sup>32</sup> Less than six weeks later, he was even more sanguine about the progress of the work. Writing to his favourite child Anna on May 22, he reported: "I have recommenced in good earnest my preliminary treatise on the elementary principles of political science, and made good progress toward finishing the rough draft. When finished I shall commence the treatise on the Federal Constitution, which I hope to finish in the course of the year, if I can remain at home."<sup>33</sup>

Calhoun, however, was not to be allowed to remain at home. Almost immediately after vacating the State Department, he came under great pressure to return to the Senate. On March 24 1845, Daniel E.Huger, elected to fill Calhoun's Senate seat in 1843, renewed an earlier offer to step down in Calhoun's favour. Calhoun resisted the temptation to become once more embroiled in politics for a full six months, but by September his resolve was weakening. On the 18th, he reported to his son-in-law, Thomas G.Clemson, "I am much urged to return to the Senate. My inclination is against it; but the state of our affairs, external and internal, is so critical, that I should feel it my duty to serve, if the state should request me."<sup>34</sup> Finally, on October 9 1845, Calhoun capitulated and accepted Huger's offer which was ratified by the South Carolina legislature without opposition late in November. On December 22, Calhoun once again took his seat in the United States Senate.<sup>35</sup>

For the next three years, no mention of the texts appears in Calhoun's correspondence. During this period other, more



pressing and immediate matters in the political arena engaged his attention. The introduction of the Wilmot Proviso in August 1846, aimed at prohibiting the extension of slavery into the territories acquired from Mexico, once more inflamed the already smouldering sectional tensions. The extent of Southern disquiet over the Wilmot Proviso can hardly be overstated; in the South, the possibility that slavery should be excluded from territory acquired by the shedding of Southern blood, seemed an intolerable injustice. Furthermore, the actual voting figures on the Proviso itself demonstrated just how tenuous the South's capacity to frustrate measures designed to attack slavery had become.<sup>36</sup> Most distressing, to Calhoun at least, was the ominous alignment of votes amongst Northern Congressmen on the Wilmot Proviso; it seemed clear to him that whatever Northerners in general thought about the tactics and the fanatical zeal of the radical abolitionists, a significant proportion of their representatives was not prepared to sanction the extension of slavery into the newly-acquired territory. In November 1846, Calhoun wrote to an unidentified correspondent in the North that "the time has arrived when the two parties of the Union should fully and truly understand one another, on the important question involved. It is proper for the North to know, that we have made up our mind to defend our rights, and if she has made up her mind to assail them, on her be the consequences."<sup>37</sup>

Between 1845 and 1848 pressure of public business prevented Calhoun from giving anything but sporadic attention to the texts. In April 1848, he confessed to his son, James Edward Calhoun, that he had hoped to have them ready for publication

in the fall of 1847, "but was so interrupted, as to fall far short of my calculation."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, the coming session of Congress promised to be a busy one and Calhoun anticipated that he would have no time to divert his energies to completing them. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that work on the Disquisition was already well advanced. Less than a fortnight after the letter to his son, Calhoun was contemplating the European revolutions of 1848 with considerable interest "as they afford me an opportunity to test the truth or error, of the principles, which I have laid down in my elementary discourse on Government."<sup>39</sup> Calhoun reported that the Disquisition was "as yet in the rough draft waiting the completion of the rough draft of the discourse on our system of government."<sup>40</sup> By April 1848, then, Calhoun had substantially worked out what he wanted to say in both the Disquisition and the Discourse. Even so, it was not until fourteen months later that he had completed the Disquisition to his entire satisfaction.<sup>41</sup>

Following the lull of three years between 1845 and 1848, during which time Calhoun was occupied fully on the Congressional front, he returned with renewed vigour to the completion of the texts in 1849. Moreover, the tone of his correspondence was more urgent than at any time in the previous six years. In June, he told Anna Clemson that he was devoting all the time left to him to the completion of the texts and that he "ought not to delay its execution any longer, and aim to put it to press, if I can finish it in the recess, next Spring, or Summer."<sup>42</sup> The reasons for this urgency were both personal and political. Since 1845 Calhoun's health had been deteriorating rapidly; in the Memphis Convention in November of that year, he had been forced to relin-



quish the chairmanship owing to the loss of his voice.<sup>43</sup> When he returned to the Senate a month later, he had been obliged to decline the chairmanship of the powerful finance committee on the grounds of poor health.<sup>44</sup> Since that time, the political battles in Congress had further taken their toll and by 1849 he was both physically and mentally exhausted. Calhoun was perfectly aware of the precarious condition of his health and he took trouble to allay the fears of his family. Yet beyond this, Calhoun's only real concern as regards his health was that he should have sufficient time to complete his political writings and thereby leave to the nation a lasting memorial of his life's work.<sup>45</sup>

That the United States as a whole, and not simply the South, would be the main beneficiary of his political theory was clear in Calhoun's mind. The political struggles over the previous four years centering on the settlement of the territories had reached a level of intensity which threatened the existence of the Union itself. Although, since the 1820s, a few individual Southerners like Robert J. Turnbull and, later, Robert Barnwell Rhett had vociferously advocated the idea of a separate Southern nation, they were not at all representative of the bulk of Southern opinion.<sup>46</sup> Since the South Carolina Nullification Crisis, however, overt attacks on slavery from the northern states had significantly eroded the loyalty of many Southerners to the Union. The acquisition of territory from Mexico made the possibility of Southern independence a distinctly more viable proposition; coupled with the increasing conviction, exemplified by measures like the Wilmot Proviso, that the North was unalterably opposed to the continued existence of slavery, Southerners

themselves began to take seriously the secessionist alternative. Indeed, it is often forgotten just how near the South came to secession in 1850. For Calhoun, however, that course was absolutely the last resort. He insisted in speech after speech that his purpose was not to destroy the Union but to save it from inevitable self-destruction should the North pursue its course. His support for a Southern Convention, called to meet in Nashville in June 1850, reflected his policy of restraint. Southern nationalists had urged immediate secession by the individual states, without recourse to a sectional convention. Calhoun and other unionists were convinced that an outward show of Southern solidarity would persuade the North that further attacks would provoke the South into secession; the realisation of this, Calhoun hoped, would lead the North to moderate its policies and restrain its more vociferous elements. Calhoun viewed the emergence of a coterie of Southern fire-eating nationalists as an ominous sign of the growing intractability of both sections. In this atmosphere, the completion of his political texts, which were founded on the premise that the Union ought to be preserved if at all possible, thus became a matter of extreme urgency.<sup>47</sup>

The urgent tone of Calhoun's letters to his family and political associates was matched by the speed with which he set to work to complete the texts. On July 14 1849, he completed the Disquisition, except for a few minor revisions. The task, he admitted, had been an arduous one and the ground covered "nearly throughout new territory." He looked forward to a few days of relaxation before coming to grips with the second part of the project. He anticipated that the Discourse would "be more than



twice as voluminous as the elementary work, but not near so difficult of execution."<sup>48</sup> After all, many of the arguments that it would contain had been well-rehearsed in his speeches over the previous five years.

The bulk of the Discourse - between three and four hundred pages - was written between June and October 1849. Calhoun was now working to a deadline. Charles Wiltse maintains that Calhoun "undoubtedly" had some correspondence with Harper Brothers in New York in the summer of that year, and this may have given added impetus to the texts' completion.<sup>49</sup> Writing to Anna on October 14, Calhoun clearly sensed that the task was drawing to an end: he tentatively set the date for submission to the press for the following midsummer and discussed more fully than he had previously done the organisational details of the final product. There were to be three parts: "a discourse on the elementary principles of government; a discourse on the Constitution and Government of the United States, and a collection of my speeches and other productions on constitutional subjects."<sup>50</sup> Calhoun's decision to publish the texts in conjunction with a set of his speeches tells us much more about the polemical purpose he envisaged his texts as performing. His main aim throughout the period of composition had been to develop an incontrovertible and meticulously-argued interpretation of the American Constitution to offset the erroneous principles enshrined in the works of Northern jurists like Joseph Story.<sup>51</sup> Constitutional theory, rather than abstract political theory, was at the heart of Calhoun's intention in writing the Discourse, for the simple reason that it was around the Constitution and its proper inter-

pretation that all the political battles of the previous five years had revolved. If the Union were to be saved, it would have to be done so by coming to grips with the mechanics of constitutional interpretation. Viewed in this light, the Disquisition takes on a superfluous appearance: why, if constitutional questions were all-important, did Calhoun spend so much time and energy (six years in all) in writing an abstract treatise of political theory?

Much of the answer lies in Calhoun's psychological make-up. Gerald Capers has suggested that Calhoun's reluctance to openly campaign on his own behalf for the presidential contest of 1844 may be attributed to his desire not to be seen to be soliciting for support.<sup>52</sup> The implication is that Calhoun felt a strong distaste for the unseemly scramble for office which characterised most of the presidential campaigns of his own lifetime. When that happened, statecraft degenerated into squalid politicking and high principles were swamped by personal ambition. Not that Calhoun himself was above political wheeler-dealing. What is notable, however, is Calhoun's constant need to cloak all his actions and ambitions in a self-justifying set of principles. It was characteristic of him to write to J.H.Hammond in 1843 disclaiming any intention of seeking the Presidency while in the same letter giving detailed instructions to his political lieutenants on how to further his candidacy.<sup>53</sup> Similarly in 1845, Calhoun staunchly refused to accept Daniel Huger's offer to retire from the Senate in order to allow him to retake his former seat unless the state legislature should summon him. In the end, no summons came, yet Calhoun accepted the offer and justified it



on the grounds of duty. In these episodes, Calhoun showed no signs of a sense of self-contradiction, only an overwhelming sense of his own importance and indispensability; he believed, perhaps rightly, that his personal accomplishments and abilities would benefit the nation, but he hated the thought of being viewed by his contemporaries as a scheming and ambitious politician. He wished always to justify his course on the unassailable grounds of principle - and if no principle were obviously apparent on a subject, Calhoun could be relied upon to devise one.

It was a similar and related trait of character which impelled him to write the Disquisition. Once Calhoun had finally decided to set down the states' rights case in written form, he was nevertheless aware that as an argument it was capable of dispute. The trend of Supreme Court decisions under Chief Justice John Marshall, backed up by more or less definitive legal commentaries like Story's, reflected an interpretation of the Constitution which was anathema to the states' rights school.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, the federal government had increasingly trespassed on the powers which had been reserved, by the Tenth Amendment, to the respective states. Against these "consolidating" tendencies, no appeal to an alternative constitutional theory was likely to succeed. What was needed to justify the constitutional theory was a coherent set of political first principles against which it could be measured. The Disquisition was Calhoun's attempt to evolve such a set of principles which would at the same time give added respectability to his interpretation of the constitution by providing a sound theoretical basis.

Involved in all this was a profound irony. The obvious

theoretical justification for the states' rights position lay in the classical liberal formula of limited government, which in turn derived its potency from natural rights philosophy. To a man like Thomas Jefferson, frequently invoked by Southerners as the champion of the states' rights cause, the power of government was the means by which the natural rights of the individual were protected. Governments had no reason for existing except to serve the community which had brought it into being and had given it its lifeblood. When it ceased to fulfil this function, or when it attempted to over-extend itself, it was liable to be replaced by another. The problem which faced Americans of the revolutionary generation, as the first people called upon to rationally construct a government, was that it was universally presumed that power had a natural tendency to accrue to itself even greater power at the expense of individual liberty.<sup>55</sup> The great question of statecraft which preoccupied the framers of the Constitution was how to reconcile sufficient power to protect the nation from external attack without creating an absolute sovereign which could turn its attention inwards against its subjects. The Articles of Confederation had exemplified the difficulties of excessive fragmentation of political power and the Constitution was designed in some measure to redress the balance. The jealousy with which the states guarded their power was based on the assumption that their liberty was best preserved by retaining for themselves the right to determine questions of purely local concern.<sup>56</sup> The federal structure, to a large extent forced on Americans by their previous colonial status, happily coincided with the new republican ideol-



ogy and became a crucial element (along with the separation of powers) in the diffusion, and hence, limitation of power. The states, in Jefferson's words, became the "true barriers of our liberty."<sup>57</sup>

The rationale of states' rights led back historically and logically to the liberal distrust of unlimited and concentrated governmental power. But it was precisely because it was a liberal preoccupation that Calhoun was forced to abandon the traditional justification and seek instead a new one. Had he invoked the liberal justification of states' rights, he would have been obliged to accept the logical presuppositions of natural rights, in which case he would have been unable to argue to his own satisfaction the morality of slavery. It was to Calhoun's credit that he recognised the dilemma at the outset. If what he wrote was to be of service to the South, it could not incorporate premises which were inimical to the institution of slavery. The Disquisition, then, was Calhoun's attempt to formulate a set of principles which would justify the states' rights position without admitting the moral evil of slavery.

Calhoun spent the last three months of his life putting the final touches to the manuscript. An immediate task which confronted him was to decide on a title for the respective texts. Throughout the period of composition, he had variously referred to the preliminary essay (which we now know as the Disquisition on Government) as an "inquiry", a "treatise" and, most confusingly, a "discourse" on the elements of political science.<sup>58</sup> As late as December 1849, Calhoun confessed that he had not finally decided on a name, though for the first time

he mentioned the possibility of calling it a "disquisition", to distinguish it from the longer essay on constitutional theory.<sup>59</sup> The rush to get the texts to print, however, may have forced his hand for scarcely two months later he was referring to it quite firmly as the "disquisition on government" in his correspondence.<sup>60</sup>

When Calhoun died on March 31 1850, most of the work on the texts was complete. The Disquisition had been revised, corrected and copied ready for publication.<sup>61</sup> The rough draft of the Discourse was finished in December 1849, and since that time Calhoun had devoted all his spare moments to preparing the final manuscript.<sup>62</sup> On the evening before his death, Calhoun had persuaded his son to read him extracts of the text with a view to making further refinements.<sup>63</sup> Whether Calhoun would have been satisfied with the subsequently published version can only be guessed at, though various scholars have commented on its diffuseness of style and argument.<sup>64</sup> In contrast with the Disquisition, which is terse and unadorned, the Discourse is unnecessarily repetitive and, at times, rambling. Even Richard Crallé, Calhoun's editor, felt obliged to point out that it bore "evident marks of interrupted and hurried composition."<sup>65</sup>

Crallé, however, was under an obligation to Calhoun to supervise the publication of the texts, and this charge was repeated by Calhoun's family after his death;<sup>66</sup> the texts duly appeared, after some delay, in November 1851 in the form of the first volume of a projected six-volume collection of Calhoun's Works. Crallé made no amendments to Calhoun's style or to the organisational details of the texts: they appeared, as Calhoun had written them, as two extended pieces of prose, without



sub-divisions or chapter headings. The lack of documentation, for which Crallé can hardly be blamed, makes it difficult to establish precisely the sources Calhoun used in their composition, nor are any clues to be gained from his correspondence. Except for one occasion in which he referred to the false concept of the state of nature, Calhoun confined his remarks on the evolution of the texts to progress reports on the process of writing.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, on the evidence of his brother-in-law, Calhoun had prepared himself fully for the task of writing political theory.<sup>68</sup>

It is difficult to estimate how many copies of the texts were printed or how they were distributed. In Crallé's correspondence with Appleton Co., the figure of 6,000 was discussed frequently but not conclusively. Distribution is even harder to gauge. By a resolution of the South Carolina General Assembly of December 16, 1851, copies of the volume were to be distributed to members of the legislature, judges, professors, and libraries in the state, and were to be presented to such other libraries and distinguished individuals (both within and beyond the state) as would be an appropriate tribute.<sup>69</sup> This included even Northern and European luminaries, among whom were the French statesman Guizot and the English philosopher J.S. Mill.<sup>70</sup>

The South, as might be expected, showed more enthusiasm for the texts than any other part of the Union. Throughout the 1850s, Southern journals published favourable reviews, though in the North the texts appear to have been cordially ignored. It was not until after the Civil War that the North American Review felt itself able to publish a review.<sup>71</sup> Yet even within the South, there was a qualitative difference in reaction to

to the respective texts. The Discourse, which contained not only a states' rights interpretation of the Constitution, but also a proposal for sweeping institutional changes by the creation of a dual executive, was quickly rejected by Southern politicians as being unworkable and too "philosophic".<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as the 1850s progressed Southern hard-liners became increasingly less inclined to consider compromise proposals for reforming the Union; to them, the salvation of the South depended upon her breaking away from the Union and establishing a separate and independent Confederacy. The Disquisition, however, enjoyed a greater degree of prestige. As an abstract treatise of political principles it did not have the disadvantage of being tied to a specific social situation, and especially not to one which was made irrelevant by force of arms. The point was that the Civil War had rendered the Discourse obsolete, along with all its convoluted arguments for a specific set of constitutional gadgets. The Disquisition, on the other hand, purported to be universally applicable; it contained no specific proposals which called for immediate acceptance or rejection. While many Southerners spurned the concrete reforms offered in the Discourse, they saw no contradiction in enthusiastically embracing the theory which underpinned it. In the scattered references made to the texts by the leaders of the Old South in the 1850s and during the Civil War, it is invariably the Disquisition which is mentioned while the Discourse is all but ignored.<sup>73</sup>



(c) The Disquisition and the Discourse: Proslavery Texts?

On no point is scholarly opinion more ambivalent than on the contribution Calhoun's texts made to the proslavery argument. In spite of the common perception of Calhoun as being preeminently a defender of slavery, scholars of the proslavery argument have been reluctant to commit themselves on the part played by the Disquisition and the Discourse in the history of the argument. William Sumner Jenkins' book Proslavery Thought in the Old South, still regarded as the seminal work in the field, took little account of Calhoun's texts and relied instead on extracts of Calhoun's political speeches to demonstrate his commitment to the defence of slavery.<sup>74</sup> Jenkins' work suffers from taking too narrow a sample of proslavery writings because he confined himself to examining pamphlets and articles which could be immediately identified as overt defences of the institution. A recent historian of the proslavery argument, Larry Edward Tise, was forced to "discard the notion that proslavery statements were limited to well-ordered, closely-argued essays on the virtues of slavery", and to conclude that the bulk of Southern writing - including fiction, poetry and essays - was shaped by the existence of slavery within the borders of the South. Tise argued from this that the definition of proslavery ought to be extended to include writings which had not previously been thought to fall within the scope of proslavery argumentation. Underlying his contention was the belief that proslavery "was a mode of thinking, a concatenation of ideas, and a system of symbols that expressed the social, cultural and moral values

of a large portion of the population of America in the first half of the nineteenth century."<sup>75</sup>

Despite the narrowness of its scope, the Jenkins thesis has exercised considerable sway over historical treatment of the proslavery argument, and his narrow definition has contributed to the ambivalence with which Calhoun's texts are regarded. Both in form and in substance, they are quite unlike anything Jenkins or subsequent historians have conventionally viewed as falling within the spectrum of proslavery argumentation. It is necessary in this section to consider briefly the nature of proslavery argumentation in order to draw the contrast between it and the political texts of Calhoun.

When historians speak of the "proslavery argument", they usually refer to the outpouring of literature written in defence of the institution in the years between 1820 and 1860. Although W.S. Jenkins noted that the proslavery argument predated direct attacks on slavery, it nevertheless acquired an added urgency in response to the crusading zeal of the radical abolitionists. "The course of proslavery theory", maintained Jenkins, "takes us from the apologist of the early period to the propagandist of slavery, from an attitude of passivity to one of militancy, from toleration to glorification of the institution."<sup>76</sup> As the abolitionist indictment grew more vociferous, it was answered by a spate of arguments designed to meet all conceivable criticisms of the institution. The most systematic of these arguments rested its case on scriptural authority.

The essence of the scriptural argument was that the institution of slavery could not be offensive to God precisely because it was sanctioned by the Bible. By a skilful process of



exegesis, defenders of slavery could demonstrate that slavery itself had been instituted directly by God as a punishment for Ham's offences against his father Noah in Genesis IX.20-25. The Curse of Canaan, described in those verses of Genesis, was to extend to all the descendants of Ham in perpetuity. This became the Biblical basis on which proslavery theologians claimed that so far from being an affront to God's law, slavery itself had been established by divine decree. The Old Testament yielded other, less positive, sanctions for slavery. From the scattered references to Abraham and Moses as owning slaves, it was inferred that here, too, was firm evidence of divine sanction. Ultimately the experience of Israel being held in bondage to Egypt afforded the supreme example of a whole nation or race being kept in servitude.

The New Testament was similarly scoured for supporting evidence of divine acceptance of slavery, but this, like most of the Old Testament references, was mainly negative. The fact that Jesus did not condemn the practice of slaveholding was construed as another example of divine sanction. So, too, was the fact that Paul, in his letter to Philemon, intended to return the escaped slave Onesimus to his owner. With meticulous care and exhaustive research the defenders of slavery prepared their arguments from scripture and moved to the attack. Northern opinions which held that slavery was contrary to the spirit of Christianity, were themselves attacked as being anti-Christian for proslavery opinions were "the veritable opinions entertained on the same subject by the God of the universe. Any attempt, therefore to refute them would involve an open conflict with the God of heaven, and lead to the rejection of his reveal-

ed truth."<sup>77</sup>

But if the Bible proved conclusively, to the proponents of slavery at least, that the institution was of divine origin and received God's sanction, it was more difficult to demonstrate that it applied directly to negroes. To defend the implicit racist element of slavery, defenders had to turn to science to seek a justification.<sup>78</sup> The work of Dr. Josiah Clark Nott, Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright and others was especially important in this connection. Nott and Cartwright attempted to justify on scientific grounds what had long been a common assumption on the part of defenders of slavery - namely, that physiological differences between blacks and whites demonstrated the innate inferiority of the negro. Craniologists prepared evidence that the brains of negroes were smaller than those of whites and concluded that this was irrefutable proof of their incapacity for sustained rational thought.<sup>79</sup>

All this evidence was presented in Southern newspapers, pamphlets, books, sermons and public addresses in the thirty or so years before the Civil War. The South's increasing sensitivity to internal and external criticism of its peculiar institution was reflected in the high incidence of proslavery articles contained in Southern Journals. Of the Southern magazines, the five most important were: the Southern Literary Messenger (1834-1864), the Southern Literary Journal (1835-1838), the Southern Quarterly Review (1842-1857), the Southern Review (1828-1832) and DeBow's Review (1846-1880). The tone of many of the articles in these journals is visibly more strident in the early 1850s. In 1847, for example, the editor of the Southern Literary Messenger, Benjamin B. Minor, wrote: "The



Messenger so long as we have control of it, shall be a distinctive, but not exclusive, Southern periodical."<sup>80</sup> Less than a decade later, a new editor, John R. Thompson, was urging Southern writers to come to the aid of slavery in an article entitled "The Duty of Southern Authors."<sup>81</sup> Four years later, in 1860, George W. Bagby, yet another editor of the Messenger, was openly declaring that the South ought to secede from the Union.<sup>82</sup>

Journals whose original purpose had not specifically been to disseminate proslavery arguments, after 1850 became vehicles for precisely that purpose. DeBow's Review, established in 1846, was originally designed to encourage the development of a rationalised industrial effort in the South, but after 1850 it was almost entirely devoted to the defence of slavery. Frank Luther Mott has written of DeBow's Review that after 1850 "it becomes almost a textbook on the Southern view of the slavery question; in the historical essay, the theological dissertation, the ethnological argument, the political editorial, in verse, satire, fiction, sermon, the changes are rung on the defense of human slavery."<sup>83</sup>

Southern magazines like DeBow's and the Southern Quarterly Review provided a convenient and accessible outlet for the proslavery writers. Many of the names of the proslavery school appear in more than one periodical: Josiah Clark Nott, for example, was a frequent contributor to DeBow's, the Southern Quarterly Review, and the Southern Review, and his theory of the diversity of the races, moreover, was first published in the Southern Quarterly Review. George Fitzhugh, arguably the

most aggressive of the proslavery school in his counter-offensive against the northern system of wage slavery, published over one hundred articles in DeBow's Review.<sup>84</sup> Other eminent proslavery names included George Frederick Holmes, St. George Tucker, William Gilmore Simms and Edmund Ruffin.

If Southern magazines and periodicals were the main vehicle for the dissemination of the proslavery argument, the growth of newspapers and libraries in the South between 1850 and 1860 afforded the timely opportunity of consolidating a distinctively southern viewpoint on the question of slavery. In 1850, the number of books in southern libraries was 561,188; by 1861 this number had increased more than five times. Most striking of all was the growth in public libraries: in 1850 Georgia came bottom of the list with only three libraries, but by 1861 this had increased to 288. The most spectacular growth in libraries occurred in Virginia which between 1850 and 1861 increased from 21 to 1350.<sup>85</sup> Of course, the increase in the number of books and library facilities does not in itself indicate that the South was self-consciously attempting to coordinate a unified viewpoint on slavery, but taken in conjunction with other actions, this is not an unreasonable supposition; it coincided, for example, with demands from Southern Commercial Conventions for a ban on text books produced in the North and insistent calls for southern authors to take up literary arms in defence of slavery. J.V. Ridgeley, in a recent study of nineteenth century Southern literature, has described what amounts to a mobilisation of literary



resources to stress the distinctiveness of southern literature and institutions.<sup>86</sup> Ridgeley's conclusion, that the institution of slavery infected the bulk of southern writing, supports the contention made by Drew Gilpin Faust and others that many southern writers felt obliged to defend slavery as a means of establishing their own cultural identity within the South itself.<sup>87</sup>

In the light of this background, Calhoun's political texts, the Disquisition and the Discourse are doubly puzzling. If they were designed to defend slavery, as J.L.Thomas suggests, they utilised neither the accepted arguments nor the usual forms of conventional proslavery argumentation. Calhoun makes no use whatever of either the scriptural argument or the ethnological argument in the texts; indeed, in the Disquisition slavery is not mentioned at all and in the Discourse only as an historical controversy. Furthermore, if Calhoun's intentions in writing the texts were to provide an apology for slavery, why did he feel the need to use the written word anyway? Clement Eaton has suggested that Calhoun's influence in the South was all-pervasive by virtue of his position in Congress: "More than any other propagandist for the righteousness of slavery, Calhoun could reach the popular ear. For a period of nearly fifteen years he spoke from the rostrum of the Senate urging a policy of no compromise with abolitionists. His speeches were spread broadcast over the South, through newspapers and through printed pamphlets. To a people alert to the drama of politics they were more potent instruments of changing public opinion than the literary essays of Dew, Harper and Simms."<sup>88</sup> Being in so well-placed a position

to propagate the Southern view of slavery, what possible reason could Calhoun have had in adopting what was for him an entirely new medium of communication?

Furthermore, it was not as if Calhoun were uninterested in the usual arguments of the proslavery school. In 1845, Henry Bidleman Bascom, a leading Kentucky Methodist and proslavery advocate, wrote a tract entitled Methodism and Slavery in which he reviewed the causes of division in the Methodist Church between North and South.<sup>89</sup> Calhoun was clearly taken with the tract which undertook to defend the Southern view of slavery using the Biblical argument. In a letter to his son-in-law, Thomas G. Clemson, Calhoun extolled the virtues of Bascom's work: it was, he maintained, "one of the fullest and most powerful vindications of the South and its institutions, which has yet appeared. It will do great good." "It is gratifying", continued Calhoun, "to see the South taking higher and higher ground on this vital subject."<sup>90</sup> So enthusiastic was Calhoun's opinion of the tract that he urged J.H. Hammond to write an article on it in the Southern Review.<sup>91</sup> Hammond's enthusiasm for Bascom's work, however, did not match Calhoun's; replying to Calhoun's request in August 1845, Hammond declined the task on the grounds that Bascom's defence was basically unsound. "To compliment Dr. Bascom for this book, without noticing its unsound and dangerous doctrines in strong terms would have had a bad effect in more ways than one, and to notice it in such a manner would have been I think imprudent just now. Judging by the difficulty I had in reading his confused and long spun essay, I am pretty certain you have only looked at it here and there and cannot have seen many passages



in it."<sup>92</sup> Calhoun, however, was insistent that the work should, at least, be noticed; the sound parts of the essay more than outweighed the bad points. Hammond concluded that Calhoun's enthusiasm for the tract was inflamed more by his desire to capture Methodist support in Kentucky for the approaching presidential contest, than for any intrinsic merit Bascom's scriptural argument might have had.<sup>93</sup>

Calhoun's interest in scriptural arguments in defence of slavery was matched by his interest in scientific data collected and collated by proslavery ethnologists. In April 1844, Calhoun, as Secretary of State, wrote to the British Minister in Washington, Francis Pakenham, in reply to a letter from Lord Aberdeen in which the Prime Minister had sought to allay American fears over British designs in Texas. Aberdeen, however, under pressure from British abolitionists, had reaffirmed the British government's intentions of opposing the extension of slavery throughout the world, and in Texas in particular. Calhoun saw his reply as an opportunity to state categorically that British abolitionist tendencies had no business interfering with the affairs of possessions outside the control of the British government. But Calhoun did not rest his argument entirely on the principles of international law; he went on to argue that so far from being a moral evil, the institution of slavery was a necessary relation between races. Citing evidence from the dubious Census of 1840, Calhoun maintained that the experience of the United States demonstrated beyond doubt that for negroes slavery was the most beneficent of institutions. The existence of free blacks in the North afforded ample proof of this; there,

negroes had "invariably sunk into vice and pauperism, accompanied by the bodily and mental afflictions thereto - deafness, blindness, insanity and idiocy - to a degree without example."<sup>94</sup>

Calhoun envisaged the Pakenham letter as being the opening shot in a protracted campaign over the relative virtues and vices of slavery, and it appears that he looked forward with relish to the next salvo. In November 1844, he wrote to Francis Wharton expressing his disappointment that the debate had not continued: "My two letters to Mr. Pakenham were intended but as the beg[inn]ing of a long correspondence with the British Government which in its progress would involve all the subjects embraced in her course in reference to our country on the question of slavery. In that, I was disappointed, as no reply was made to my second letter to Mr. Pakenham; but much, which I intend to bring out, has been brought out on other questions."<sup>95</sup>

In preparation for the "long correspondence" which did not materialise, Calhoun had immersed himself in ethnological evidence which was designed to show the peculiar fitness of the negro for slavery. Calhoun sent for George R. Gliddon who happened to be visiting the capital at the time, and requested that he supply him with the latest scientific evidence of racial inferiority. Gliddon put Calhoun in touch with Samuel George Morton, a pioneer craniologist, who sent Calhoun copies of his two works Crania Americana and Crania Aegyptiaca. Gliddon also supplied Calhoun with three of his own pamphlets on ethnology. Gliddon was delighted that so eminent a statesman as Calhoun was beginning to take notice of the findings of the proslavery school of ethnologists. He reported with confidence to Calhoun that ethnological findings



offered incontrovertible proof of negro inferiority. "Negro-Races", maintained Gliddon, had "ever been Servants and slaves, always distinct from, and subject to, the Caucasian, in the remotest times." In his eagerness to impress, Gliddon wrote that "we have any amount of facts at our disposal to support and confirm all those doctrines, that for so long and bright a period, have marked the illustrious career of John C. Calhoun."<sup>96</sup>

It cannot be doubted, then, that Calhoun showed the most intense interest in the scriptural and ethnological arguments of the proslavery writers. Both on scientific and biblical grounds Calhoun accepted as an established fact that the negro was an inferior being and that, as such, slavery was the condition to which he was best suited. But the original question remains: if Calhoun accepted the conventional proslavery arguments why did he make no use of them in writing his texts? The absence of such arguments suggests that Calhoun's intention in writing the Disquisition and Discourse was not to provide an open and direct defence of slavery, but to attack the patterns of thought which gave rise to the abolitionist impulse. The structure of Calhoun's mind led him back naturally to first principles: from his very earliest days in Congress, he showed a tendency in almost all his speeches to view matters of policy in terms of a consistent body of underlying principles.<sup>97</sup> Many of his speeches, therefore, read like theoretical discourses. To Calhoun, the abolitionist indictment of slavery stemmed from an imperfect understanding of the "true" principles of political science; a doctrinaire obsession with abstract theories had obscured the fact that politics could only be conducted on the basis of compromise and mutual

toleration. The attack on slavery was, ultimately, only a symptom of an irrational attachment to libertarian and egalitarian ideals in the face of concrete realities.

Calhoun's decision to attack the antislavery crusaders on the grounds of political theory accounts for the format of his political writings. In almost all the letters in which he discusses the progress of the works, he emphasises the point that he is attempting to evolve a consistent body of political principles. Moreover, his repeated references to "political science" suggest that he believed that for political institutions to be successful, they ought to conform to certain immutable laws of human behaviour. In the opening paragraphs of the Disquisition, Calhoun makes explicit his assumption that the study of politics is analagous to the study of natural phenomena; in his discussion of human nature, he breaks down political behaviour into its raw elements and attempts to construct a system of government based on the actual, observable behaviour of human beings. For without identifying the motivations of individuals, "it is impossible to lay any solid foundation for the science of government as it would be to lay one for that of astronomy without a like understanding of that constitution or law of the material world according to which the several bodies composing the solar system mutually act on each other and by which they are kept in their respective spheres."<sup>98</sup> For Calhoun, a successful political system was one, therefore, which accorded with the observed nature of man and took steps to minimise his moral weaknesses and develop his potentialities.

In his decision to eschew the conventional forms of pro-slavery writing in favour of a treatise on political science,



Calhoun was both ambitious and optimistic. He was ambitious because he hoped to correct a habit of thinking which placed a higher priority on a priori ideals than on observed experience, which in his book was a short route to disaster. But at the same time he was optimistic in his belief that he could convince men, by the power of reason and logic, to accept the truth of his system. By going back to the first principles of politics, Calhoun believed that he could expose the fallacious reasoning which gave rise to abolitionism. False conceptions of the nature of man, liberty and equality had produced a fundamental distortion of political reality which could only be remedied by a return to sound principles based on observed experience. Scriptural and ethnological arguments, valuable as they were in consolidating southern opinion on slavery, could not answer satisfactorily the charge of the abolitionists that all men were created equal and were endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. The moral equality of individuals might ultimately be a theological matter, but politics had to contend with the fact that there were very real inequalities amongst men - inequalities of skill, intelligence, industry and ability. A sense of political realism demanded that a doctrinaire attachment to abstract ideals should not obscure the way forward to sound political practice. As early as February 1837, Calhoun had recognised and had warned against the pervasive and fanatical appeal to abstract political conceptions. He told the Senate on February 6th:

Those who imagine that the spirit now abroad in the North, will die away of itself without a shout [sic, shock?] or convulsion, have formed a very inadequate

conception of its real character; it will continue to rise and spread, unless prompt and efficient measures, to stay its progress, be adopted. Already it has taken possession of the pulpit, of the schools, and to a considerable extent of the press; those great instruments by which the mind of the rising generation will be formed. 99

Against such "political fanaticism", scriptural and ethnological arguments in defence of slavery held no appeal. The scriptural argument in particular was unlikely to convince the abolitionist mind in its literal interpretation of the Bible. By the mid-nineteenth century, American Christianity had been largely remoulded to conform to the dominant liberal political ideology; the Calvinistic conception of a personal, intervening God had to a considerable extent been replaced by deistic notions of a prime mover of the universe. The status of the Bible as God's written Word had been devalued, even replaced, as the sole repository of divine revelation, by a faith in man's capacity for rational thought.<sup>100</sup> Appeals to the authority of Holy Scripture in defence of slavery were therefore hardly likely to convince the abolitionists.<sup>101</sup> Nor, it must be admitted, were they likely to convince Calhoun himself. Despite the lip-service he paid to Bascom's work, Calhoun was himself deeply imbued with deistic conceptions of God, and this is apparent in the Disquisition.\*

Calhoun, it appears, then, was attempting a more ambitious task in writing the texts than his proslavery fellow Southerners. The texts were a self-conscious attempt to lay down realistic principles of political behaviour based on the observed nature

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\* For Calhoun's religious views, see Chapter Five below



of man. By elevating the debate to the realm of political theory, Calhoun hoped to demonstrate that the southern point of view could call on a respectable set of political principles which offered a "solid" basis for governmental institutions. It was another example of the South taking the higher ground in defence of her established institutions.

(d) Calhoun's Intended Audience

In November 1851, Richard K. Crallé informed Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia that "The first volume of Mr. Calhoun's Works is now published, containing his views on Government, and the Constitution." At the same time, Crallé expressed his conviction that the work was destined to exercise a powerful influence on public opinion throughout the Union. "It cannot be otherwise", he continued, "A few, and these prominent Whigs, to whom I have loaned the single volume I have, have openly and publicly declared that its views and arguments are unmeasurable."<sup>102</sup> Crallé's optimism may, in part, be attributed to the role he played as editor of the texts, but there can be little doubt that it was also a faithful reflection of Calhoun's own hopes of the effect that the Disquisition and the Discourse would have.

Much has been written in recent years about the audience to whom the proslavery argument was directed. Historians following the lead taken by W.S. Jenkins, have generally assumed that the proslavery arguments took the form of a counter-offensive against the attacks of northern abolitionists. Jenkins' assert-

ion that "Slavery had defenders whenever defenders were needed; the exact nature of the defense was determined to a great extent by the degree to which and by the way in which the welfare of slavery was endangered", seemed inevitably to point to the fact that proslavery writings were intended in some way to answer the charges of the abolitionists.<sup>103</sup> But if abolitionist attacks were the occasion for proslavery counter-assertions, it does not follow that the abolitionists themselves were their targets. In 1936, Professor William B. Hesseltine suggested that the outpouring of proslavery literature was designed specifically to win over the southern non-slaveholder to the side of the upper-class planter in order to produce sectional unanimity on the issue of slavery.<sup>104</sup> Since Hesseltine's work was published (in the 1930s), other convincing arguments have been advanced to support his general conclusion that the proslavery argument was directed inwards towards the South itself. Ralph Morrow argued that the proslavery argument was intended to buttress the stricken consciences of slaveholders themselves who felt uneasy about the contradictions between the professed American creed of liberty and equality and the existence of the institution of slavery.<sup>105</sup> Morrow presented convincing evidence to show that the North, by the 1840s and 1850s, was intransigent on the issue and, more to the point, that Southern writers realised this. Northern intransigence was manifested by its refusal to publish proslavery defences in the national newspapers and the reluctance of northern publishing houses to print them.<sup>106</sup> David Donald, dissenting from Morrow's conclusion, nevertheless reaffirmed that the South was the main target of proslavery propaganda. Donald found the main impetus for the proslavery argument in the psychological



make-up of the proslavery writers themselves. He argued that, in the main, the proslavery propagandists were men who were frustrated by their own position within Southern society and that in their writings they projected an idealised and largely mythical vision of a paternalistic South. They were driven on by a yearning to recreate a society which had never really existed outside their own dreams.<sup>107</sup>

If the weight of historical opinion seems to suggest that the proslavery argument was directed to the South itself, this marks another point of departure between the texts of Calhoun and the general proslavery dialectic. From the evidence of his letters, it is clear that Calhoun intended his texts to have a considerable effect on northern opinion. Whether this was nothing more than an optimistic faith in his own ability to reach an intransigent audience, or a shrewd estimate of his political reputation within the North, Calhoun did not share the despondency of other proslavery propagandists over the North's refusal to read southern defences of slavery.<sup>108</sup> In October 1849, he wrote to Anna about the progress of the texts: "I think the work is called for by the times, and that it will make an impression. I have stated my opinions on all points, just as I entertain them, without enquiring, or regarding, whether they will be popular, or not. Truth is my object, and to that I closely adhere...."<sup>109</sup> In the same month, Calhoun wrote to his son Andrew Pickens Calhoun, reporting that the texts were "looked to with great interest" in the North.<sup>110</sup>

Calhoun's desire to reach a northern audience may have controlled his decision to have the texts printed in New York.<sup>111</sup> Charles Wiltse maintains that Calhoun "undoubtedly" had some

correspondence with Harper Brothers in New York during the summer of 1849 and the Washington correspondent of the New York Herald reported inaccurately in his despatch of December 30th, 1849 that the texts were already in the press.<sup>112</sup>

It is possible that Calhoun felt he may have been more successful in presenting the southern case to the North than the more overtly proslavery advocates because of his position as a national statesman. Calhoun was well aware that his name carried considerable weight beyond the boundaries of the South; as a contender in at least two presidential elections, he had formed contacts in every state of the Union, and his name was more widely known than that of any other Congressional politician, with the possible exception of Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. Furthermore, his political career had demonstrated that his interest extended over a wide range of policy decisions and was not confined to the single obsessive issue of slavery. Though the slavery issue increasingly came to dominate his course, the awareness of his other contributions on matters of complexity and delicacy may have disposed the northern public to give Calhoun a fairer hearing than his proslavery counterparts.

Calhoun may also have believed that the format in which he presented the texts would encourage the North to view him not as a proslavery advocate, but as a serious political theorist searching for basic principles of political action. His emphasis on the scientific approach to politics in general would, he believed, appeal to all reasonable minds in the North, and would "do much to explode errors and cast light on the subjects of which they treat."<sup>113</sup>



If Calhoun envisaged the texts as performing a valuable function in themselves of correcting false notions of political action, they may also have served a more politically expeditious task. Gerald M. Capers has suggested that the writing of the texts was one element of a dual strategy of force and persuasion. Calhoun, he argues, devoted the last year of his life to a campaign designed to clarify once and for all the issues between North and South. The coercive element of this strategy manifested itself in his strenuous advocacy of a Southern Convention which would accomplish the double purpose of consolidating southern unity and at the same time of presenting a united front to the North. By defining the southern position as one of implacable opposition to further northern encroachments, Calhoun hoped to convince the North that the South was no longer prepared to tolerate external attacks on her vital institutions. By drawing the line and in effect issuing the North with an ultimatum, Calhoun was hoping to persuade moderate conservative elements in the North to restrain the extreme abolitionists.<sup>114</sup> When Mississippi called a state convention to elect delegates to a Southern Convention to be held in Nashville in June 1850, Calhoun gave his wholehearted approval: "Mississippi has acted well on the slave question", he wrote, "and I hope Alabama and every other Southern State will back her and send delegates to Nashville. It is all important that they should. Bad would be our condition, if the Convention should fail for want of backing."<sup>115</sup>

The texts, according to Capers, formed the persuasive arm of this strategy; the Discourse in particular, with its review of American constitutional history and its arguments about the

intentions of the framers, would show the North how the South was being tyrannised. Taken in conjunction, the strategy could not fail to convince the North that dissolution of the Union was the unavoidable consequence of further abolitionist assaults.<sup>116</sup>

The North, then, seems to have been the main target of the texts in Calhoun's mind. Nevertheless, the effect they would have on the South itself should not be underestimated. The success of the proslavery arguments based on scripture and ethnology was considerable within the South, but they were insufficient to provide an all-embracing political defence of the section within the Union. Jesse T. Carpenter has identified the constitutional mechanisms that the South relied upon for the protection of her institutions as a sectional minority as being the principles of local self-government, the concurrent voice, constitutional guarantees and finally, the threat of secession.<sup>117</sup> The theory of the concurrent majority, with which Calhoun is preeminently identified, was most fully and systematically set out in the Disquisition and it showed Calhoun's concern not only to justify southern institutions, but also to propose a workable mechanism to protect those institutions. In writing the texts, Calhoun was performing a most valuable service for the South in providing her with a fully worked-out means of protection.

That the South itself looked with great interest to the publication of the texts is attested to by the letters of encouragement Calhoun received from friends and political associates. In April 1845, Francis Wharton summed up the sense of anticipation when he wrote: "The friends of constitutional law and of true political science, expect much from you. We want a full,



thorough, and just, disquisition on the theory of our constitution, and we want, in addition, to it, what Hallam has given to Great Britain, a sketch of our constitutional history."<sup>118</sup> Similarly, J.H.Hammond writing to Calhoun three years later, expressed himself "extremely anxious to see your Book on Government". Hammond's main concern was to get from Calhoun a positive defence of property rights which could be used in the political arena to defend slaveholding.<sup>119</sup>

Calhoun's intended audience seems primarily to have been the North, though the South's lack of a systematic theoretical defence may have acted as an added incentive. Yet there is a clear sense in which Calhoun hoped to transcend the immediate political context and to make a positive and original contribution to the study of government in general. The style of the texts, especially the Disquisition, is that of an abstract treatise in the tradition of classic political theorists. His preoccupation with framing the system of government on supposedly value-free premises derived from direct observation of man's nature, suggests Calhoun's desire to evolve a governmental framework based on a realistic apprehension of man's capacities and weaknesses. His repeated assertion that he was investigating "the elementary principles of political science" shows that, however interested a party he was in the sectional conflict, he believed in an absolute standard of political behaviour which applied to all communities at all periods of history. In this way, his texts may have been addressed to all serious students of government.

(e) The European Dimension

If Calhoun envisaged the texts as performing a persuasive function within the Union - South as well as North - it is equally clear that he hoped for a wider audience. His letters to various correspondents over the period during which the texts were composed offer striking evidence that he expected his ideas to have some impact in Europe. In a letter to the young Francis Wharton in December 1843, Calhoun made the first reference to his intention to write about political matters in a theoretical sense, and it is notable that the intention, casual as it then was, was prompted by a concern to correct European misconceptions of the American system of government: "The conception on that side of the Atlantick", he wrote, "is universally false in reference to our system of government. It is indeed a most remarkable system; the most so, that ever existed. I have never yet discussed it in its higher elementary principles, or rather, I ought to say, in reference to higher elementary principles of political science. If I should have leisure, I may yet do it."<sup>120</sup>

Calhoun's impressions of the general state of European opinion in regard to the United States were formed by the numerous contacts he made with visiting Europeans and with official American representatives abroad. Amongst the visitors to Washington who sought out his company were Harriet Martineau, the indomitable British social reformer and antislavery crusader. Miss Martineau's opinion of Calhoun was ambivalent; the portrait she painted of him in her account of her travels, as the "cast-iron man" obsessed with the single aim of perpetuating human slavery, is tinged with a perverse kind of admiration which found later expression in her Autobiography. "Mr. Calhoun", she wrote, "whom with all his absurd-



ities, I respected by far the most of the three[Clay, Webster and Calhoun], in the long run. All were hugely ambitious: but Calhoun was honest in the main point. He lived and died for the cause of slavery; and, however far such a career is from the sympathies of the English people, the openness and directness of his conduct were at least respectable. He was infatuated by his sectional attachments: but he was outspoken and consistent."<sup>121</sup>

Other eminent European visitors included Robert Owen and Charles Dickens. In the winter of 1824, Robert Owen is recorded as "having spent the evening in a tête-a-tête with Mr. Calhoun, whom he considers a man of considerable genius and extensive speculator into the progress of events."<sup>122</sup> In March 1842, Charles Dickens visited the capital and met with a series of "very remarkable men", including Calhoun, though it appears that the Dickenses made a more lasting impression on Calhoun than he on them.<sup>123</sup>

It is difficult to estimate accurately the precise effect of these contacts in forming Calhoun's impressions of English and European opinion. Calhoun would certainly have known of the antislavery sympathies of Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens. It is more likely, however, that Calhoun's information was gained from other sources more intimately attuned to political matters. During the course of the 1840s, Calhoun was in constant communication with trusted associates who travelled extensively in Europe. His son-in-law, Thomas G. Clemson, was appointed charge d'affaires in Brussels in May 1844, taking Anna, Calhoun's favourite daughter, with him.<sup>124</sup> It seems that as an informant, Anna was more useful to Calhoun

than her husband. Charles Wiltse has commented that her "thought processes were so like his Calhoun's own as to be almost an extension of his faculties."<sup>125</sup> The frequency of their correspondence, coupled with Anna's extensive commentary on European affairs, suggests that she was the main agent in shaping his impressions of the European scene. Another important source was Calhoun's close friend and political supporter, Duff Green. Green had been an ardent admirer and confidant of Andrew Jackson and a member of his kitchen cabinet, but broke with him over the Eaton affair. After that, Green's political sympathies were transferred to Calhoun and were consolidated when Green's daughter married Calhoun's son, Andrew Pickens Calhoun, in May 1836.<sup>126</sup> In December 1841, Green was given the important post of President Tyler's personal representative to the British government, where he remained until January 1844. Throughout his time in London, Green corresponded frequently with Calhoun and kept him informed of the state of British opinion, both in the government and in the country at large. Through his own personal contacts and writings, Green attempted to shape British public opinion to accommodate American policies and institutions - including the institution of slavery. It was to this end that he urged Calhoun, amongst others, to publish letters and articles directly in the British press. In September 1843, Green reported to Calhoun that he had arranged for the prestigious Edinburgh Review to publish a review of his, Calhoun's, life and speeches and "Judge Upshur's review of Judge Story's book on the Am.Constitution." A concerted campaign in the British press would go a long way, Green was convinced "in disabusing the European Public as to our character



and institutions."<sup>127</sup>

A similar concern motivated the efforts of William R. King, American Minister to France. Late in 1844, King wrote to Calhoun expressing his frustrations over the inability of American institutions to receive a faithful representation in the French press. King's anger was stimulated by the efforts of British abolitionists to agitate the issue of emancipation in the French colonies which culminated in the impending discussion of the measure in the French legislature. King complained to Calhoun that "many of the prominent Journals in Paris are in the pay of Exeter Hall; and they abound in publications containing the most false and exaggerated statements on the subject of slavery. If France influenced by the efforts now making, should abolish slavery in her Colonies, Spain and Brazill will be compelled to yield to the pressure which will be brought to bear upon them; and the United States will be left to stand alone, with the whole civilized world against her." King's suggested remedy for this state of affairs was to urge Calhoun, as Secretary of State, to appropriate money from "the secret or contingent fund at your disposal" to finance a carefully-orchestrated propaganda campaign in the French press. Unless such a campaign were initiated, official diplomatic representatives would have to sit idly by "and see our Institutions stigmatized and our people calumniated without the means of counteracting the false impressions made to our prejudice."<sup>128</sup>

Calhoun was thus well aware of European attitudes towards the United States, and her institutions. His distrust of these attitudes was further reinforced by the activities of British abolitionists and the support they gave to their American count-

parts. The most visible British intervention in American affairs developed over the question of the annexation of Texas. In the mid 1830s, Texas had broken away from Mexico and had established herself as an independent republic, but had indicated that she was not unwilling to become a part of the United States. The southern states saw in annexation an opportunity to extend the boundaries of slavery within the Union, since Texas had maintained the institution even though it had been abolished by Mexico. It was for precisely this reason that some elements in the North were reluctant to accede to demands for annexation. If Texas were annexed as a slaveholding state, the balance between the sections would be upset to the disadvantage of the North.<sup>129</sup>

The situation was complicated by the fact that the British government and British abolitionist societies looked to Texas with interest. To the British government, an independent Texas linked to Britain by a commercial treaty would serve the dual purpose of checking the growth of the United States and of providing a base from which to launch commercial extension into the American continent. To the English abolitionists Texas was viewed as a test case; they believed that Britain should support an independent Texas, but make emancipation a condition of recognition. This policy was urged on the government by John Scoble in his pamphlet "Texas, its claims to be Recognised as an Independent Power by Great Britain", published in December 1839.<sup>130</sup>

The effect of foreign censure of American institutions seems to have confirmed in Calhoun's mind the need for a suitable corrective to the "false" impressions created abroad. In



the letters where he refers to the writing of the Disquisition and the Discourse this seems to be a recurring preoccupation. Following the Revolutions of 1848 in Europe, the completion of the texts became a matter of added urgency. It was not, Calhoun felt, that the European countries had misconceived the nature of American government so much as they had misconceived the nature of liberty and equality in their own countries. Writing to his daughter Anna in June 1848, Calhoun explained that France's "conception of liberty is false throughout. Her standard of liberty is ideal; it belongs to that kind of liberty which man has been supposed to possess, in what has been falsely called a state of nature, - a state supposed to have preceded the social and political, and in which, of course, if it ever existed, he must have lived a part, as an isolated individual, without Society, or Government." It was this habit of thinking that Calhoun was concerned most of all to combat because it led to utopian dreams which could never be realised in practice. Furthermore, the pernicious effects of this mode of thought was threatening American institutions: "Abolitionism originates in it, which every day becomes more formidable, and if not speedily arrested, must terminate in the dissolution of our Union."<sup>131</sup>

Evidence of American receptivity of transatlantic principles had already been graphically demonstrated in the Dorr uprising in Rhode Island in 1842. Discontent over the restricted franchise granted by the colonial charter under which Rhode Island was still governed, burst forth in 1841 when an unsanctioned constitutional convention framed a new constitution. The "People's Constitution", as it was called, extended the franchise from a small group of freeholders to

all adult males. In April 1842, a state-wide election was held under the illegal constitution, and Thomas Dorr Wilson was elected Governor. The constitutionally-elected Governor of the state appealed to the Federal government for support when Dorr prepared to take control by force. The uprising collapsed in June 1842, but the episode had a lasting effect on public opinion in the United States.<sup>132</sup> Calhoun, writing in April 1848, to James Edward Calhoun, made the explicit connexion between "Dorrism" and the revolutionary principles of France. Explaining to his son the delay in the completion of the texts, he wrote: "I do not think anything will be loast [sic] by the delay. I do not think the public mind is yet fully prepared for the work, nor will be, until there has been such failure and embarassment in the French experiment ... as will bring into distrust and doubt, Dorrism, so as to prepare the publick mind to have its errors and consequences pointed out, and to reflect seriously on the question; what are the elements, which are indispensable to constitute a constitutional popular government?...." <sup>133</sup>

It seems clear, then, that Calhoun intended the texts to have some influence on European opinion and that hope was made explicit in a letter to Andrew Pickens Calhoun in July 1849. Commenting on the progress of the texts, Calhoun wrote: "The work will hit the lines both here and in Europe; and, I think, cannot fail to make a deep impression."<sup>134</sup> Calhoun hoped that the Disquisition and the Discourse would perform a dual function in Europe: in the first place, they would clarify beyond doubt the principles upon which the American system was based and present a categorical assertion of the



consistency of American institutions. This task devolved primarily on the Discourse in which Calhoun drew his principles from the intentions of the Founding Fathers. By demonstrating the compatibility of American practice and theory, he hoped to forestall direct criticism from Europe of American institutions. But Calhoun was not content to rest his case there; the Disquisition was designed to provide a tightly-knit body of principles upon which all constitutional governments ought to be built. He believed that political knowledge, like all scientific knowledge, came from the patient observation of behaviour combined with the careful framing of tentative hypotheses. In April 1848, he reported to Anna that he looked "with greater solicitude for the unfolding of the great events now in progress in Europe, as they afford me an opportunity to test the truth or error of the principles, which I have laid down in my elementary discourse on Government.... I cannot doubt the correctness of the principles for they are drawn from facts in the moral world, just as certain, as any in the physical; but I am solicitous to see, how far they are subject to modification in their practical application to the present condition of the civilized world, which is so very different from any, that ever preceded it in many respects."<sup>135</sup>

It seems clear that the European dimension to the texts was not an unimportant one in Calhoun's mind. His deliberate decision to frame the Disquisition, at least, in the form of an abstract and supposedly universal theory would have appealed to a European audience. Calhoun hoped that it would provide a much-needed corrective to the dangerous political doctrines

which were emanating from Europe, and from France in particular; moreover, he hoped, somewhat optimistically, that the texts in themselves would produce a revolution in the patterns of thought which had given rise to abstract and unrealistic political creeds.

(f) Conclusion

From the evidence of the foregoing sections, certain conclusions may be drawn about Calhoun's intentions in writing the Disquisition and the Discourse. In the first place, although they were occasioned by the constitutional debates over slavery and its place within the Union, the texts do not fall within the accepted spectrum of proslavery argumentation. The abandonment of scriptural and ethnological arguments in favour of a general theory of government suggests that Calhoun was taking an "enlarged" view of the situation, pursuing the consequences for politics back to their logical conclusions. For the proslavery school, the preservation of slavery was the beginning and the end of their vision; so deeply embedded in the southern psyche had the institution become - as an economic relation certainly, but more importantly as a social relation - that they contemplated its demise with dread; and from that dread they conjured up the ghastly spectre of a society and system of values uprooted and overturned, of mass slaughter and rape, of political and



and social anarchy. The prospect of the termination of their distinctive way of life was unthinkable.<sup>136</sup>

There is no doubt that Calhoun shared their fears. In his speeches to the Senate, he presented a variety of arguments in favour of perpetuating slavery: on the grounds of the natural inferiority of the negro, the economic ruin it would entail for slaveholders if the relation were ended, on the notion that the enslavement of one social grouping was a prior condition of the progress of the remainder, even on the old Jeffersonian argument that abolition would cause greater evil for society than if it were left untouched.<sup>137</sup> Yet what disturbed Calhoun most was the frightening prospect that the central pillar on which southern civilisation rested could be pulled down by constitutional means. Since the founding of the republic, the South had become increasingly aware of her minority status within the Union. Economically and industrially she had watched the North expand while she herself remained static. In the Halls of Congress, especially in the House of Representatives, northern growth was reflected in the number of Congressmen she sent to Washington. In the Senate the South had maintained parity of numbers only after bitter and divisive debates over the admission of new states, resulting in uneasy compromises. All this might not have mattered so much had there existed an ideological consensus, a basic agreement between the sections on the principles and values which governed political life. But whatever consensus there had been in 1787, it had been a fragile one; James Madison had prophetically pointed out to the Constitutional Convention that "the great danger to our general government is the great southern and northern interests of the

continent, being opposed to each other."<sup>138</sup> Since the Missouri Compromise in 1820, the consensus was in danger of splitting apart on the issue of slavery. The agitation of the northern abolitionists in the 1830s brought the issue out into the open and demonstrated to the South that once her northern neighbour had achieved a constitutional majority capable of doing so, she would abolish slavery throughout the Union. By 1850, the split between the sections on the slavery question was so far advanced that Calhoun wrote just three weeks before he died that it was "difficult to see how two peoples so different and hostile can exist together in one common Union."<sup>139</sup>

For Calhoun, as for most southerners, abolition was an horrendous thought; but that it could be accomplished under existing constitutional arrangements was intolerable. To his mind, trained in the intricacies of constitutional argument, it demonstrated a fundamental defect of the Constitution. That a majority could, with the full sanction of law, deprive a minority of her rights appeared manifestly unjust. Had not the writer of Federalist No.51 claimed that "Justice is the end of government" and "In a society under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature, where the weaker individual is not secured against the violence of the stronger"? But had he not significantly added that "In the extended republic of the United States... a coalition of a majority of the whole society could seldom take place on any other principles than those of justice and the general good"?<sup>140</sup> The problem that Calhoun recognised and confronted head on was that on the issue of slavery, there were two antithetical senses



of justice. The North, holding fast to the traditional liberal creed, condemned outright the notion and practice that one category of human beings could be held in slavery as the property of other human beings, while the South, on the contrary, believed that its liberty could only be secured by the frank recognition of its rights to hold such property.

The implications for American politics were profound. Calhoun perceived that it was possible for any majority to unite on an idea and to tyrannise the minority party. The elaborate safeguards which the Founding Fathers had built into the Constitution had been unable to prevent it from occurring in the United States, and, he reasoned, other countries less sensitive to the rights of their minorities, might suffer from the same defect. Important as the threat to slavery was, it was nonetheless an example of how inadequately constructed governments could turn on one section of its citizens. This, in some measure, accounts for the differences in style between the Disquisition and the Discourse: while the latter addressed itself to the immediate problem as it appeared in the United States, the former considered the wider implications for political systems in general. This, too, is the reason why Calhoun's texts differ so strikingly from the usual arguments of the pro-slavery school. Where they contrived an exhaustive set of arguments to defend the institution of slavery directly, Calhoun looked beyond the immediate threat to explore the ramifications for government. In this sense, Calhoun may justly be called a political theorist. By returning to first principles he was seeking to close a loophole which had been left in liberal theory by John Locke, and which had worked itself out in

its practical operation in the crisis over slavery. Taken together, the Disquisition and the Discourse dealt with both facets of the problem: the Disquisition attempted to resolve the theoretical difficulties while the Discourse addressed itself to the practical problem of protecting a particular minority in a particular time and place. Slavery, as the critical issue, was hardly touched on at all for there was no great merit in repeating arguments which one section passionately believed and the other studiously ignored. What was needed was a fully worked-out method of protection which had a sound basis in theory. It is this, more than anything else, that separated Calhoun from the proslavery school. Their obsession with defending the institution directly displayed an ideological commitment which is not apparent in Calhoun's texts.

Not apparent, at least, on the surface. For there is an intriguing aspect to Calhoun's Disquisition which will receive fuller treatment in the second part of this study, but which deserves a mention here. The protection of minorities which Calhoun was so anxious to secure was ultimately an extension of the protection accorded to all individuals under natural rights theory. Indeed, there is no logical reason why minorities should be protected at all except insofar as they are aggregations of individuals, each possessing inalienable rights. The proper tradition of concern which Calhoun ought to have been contributing to was, therefore, the liberal one which was based entirely on natural rights theory. But instead, Calhoun launches a systematic attack on its most cherished theoretical postulates; he strikes down the notion of a presocial



state of nature, from which the whole concept of natural rights originally derived; he dispenses with the social contract which was the device by which those rights were secured in society. In the place of these unabridgable personal rights which predate society, he interposes a set of rights which is determined by the community and which is subject to periodic revision. Calhoun thus ends up by arguing against himself. So far from producing a theory which safeguards the rights of minorities, he effectively eliminates the logical justification for such protection and in the process creates the rationale for a kind of communitarian coerciveness. If society - in whatever way - determines the rights of its citizens, what is there to stop it from tyrannising a dissenting minority in the name of the common good?

Had Calhoun been solely interested in evolving theoretical techniques to protect minorities, there would have been no need for him to have abandoned the philosophy of natural rights. That he felt the need to do so suggests that he had another purpose in mind, that is, to include in his scheme of government no premises which, when traced back, could be construed as giving support to antislavery doctrines. While the Disquisition contains no ideas which are obviously proslavery, it does attack concepts on which the abolitionists had relied heavily.

Whatever the logical difficulties of the texts (and these will be examined in subsequent chapters), it seems clear that Calhoun would have been unhappy in writing in any other genre. The proslavery school of writers relied too much on evidence which was capable of being overthrown when confronted

by a good argument. Its reliance especially on scriptural authority would not have appealed to Calhoun's deistic inclinations. What he was primarily interested in, and what compelled his attention most, was the appeal to principle: for years in the Senate he had exasperated his colleagues by meticulously extracting the principles involved in each question of public policy. It was not always the most obvious principle that he extracted, but once he had decided he defended it with a powerful logic. The Disquisition, especially, reflects this distinctive style. Calhoun's faith in the ability of his principles to persuade others to accept his point of view rested on his belief in the reasonableness of the human mind. It was this belief that encouraged him to think, perhaps over-optimistically, that he could reach an audience in the North which had long since closed its mind to the arguments of the proslavery South.



PART TWO

THE DISQUISITION ON GOVERNMENT AND THE CONCEPT OF THE  
"REACTIONARY ENLIGHTENMENT"

### Chapter Three: The Intellectual Ethos of Enlightenment Thought in Europe and America

#### (a) The "Reactionary Enlightenment"

Up to this point, attention has been focused on the external details of Calhoun's political texts with very little reference to the ideas they contain. Moreover, they have been treated as a conceptual whole, united in purpose in the mind of the author, but comprehending different areas of concern. That this procedure was appropriate in gauging Calhoun's intentions seems confirmed by the evidence; at no point in the composition of the texts did Calhoun conceive of them as having an existence independent of one another. The possibility of publishing them separately did not occur to Calhoun because from the outset both texts were necessary to fulfil the function he intended for them: to convince the North and the South that the only hope for saving the Union was by means of a constitutional amendment by which the vital interests of both sections could be protected.<sup>1</sup> The Discourse, which contained the proposal for a plural executive, was the heart of the matter; but to a man of Calhoun's cast of mind, an argument unsupported by a consistent set of underlying principles was incomplete and infinitely capable of contradiction. What was needed to give force and vitality to the specific proposals of the Discourse was such a body of principles, and it was this function which devolved upon the Disquisition. An intimate, purposive connection was thus established between the texts by Calhoun at their inception.



It nevertheless remains the case that however united the texts were in purpose and intention, they appear in style and content to bear very little relation to one another. Calhoun's assertion in April 1848 that the Discourse was to be "a philosophical discussion on its [the U.S. Constitution's] character and constitution in illustration of the elementary treatise...." seems not to have been borne out.<sup>2</sup> Except insofar as the concurrent majority is discussed, the Discourse makes no use of the theoretical elements laid down in the Disquisition; its arguments are essentially historical and legalistic.<sup>3</sup> In the first place, Calhoun establishes with great plausibility that the framers of the Constitution intended to construct a government based on the principle of concurrence. By dividing the federal government into three branches and carefully apportioning each with powers which interlocked with the others, the framers, Calhoun argued, ensured that no one arm of the government could act unilaterally without the concurrence of at least one other department. The different bases of representation for each branch ensured also that no governmental action could be undertaken without the consent of a wide spectrum of divergent interests. Thus, for a law to be enacted, the consent of a majority of the House of Representatives and a majority of the Senate plus the consent of the chief magistrate was required; since each was elected by different modes of representation and was responsible to different electoral constituencies, the interests of a large proportion of the electorate were consulted, at least nominally, before a bill could become law.<sup>4</sup>

Having established to his own satisfaction that the Constitution embodied the concurrent principle, Calhoun moved on to consider whether or not political events since the 1780s had conformed to it. Beginning with the Judiciary Act of 1789, Calhoun maintained that the federal government had displayed a tendency to invade the powers reserved to the respective states. The Act, by making the Supreme Court the final court of appeal in cases involving state, as well as federal, law had converted the federal government into the "sole judge, in the last resort, as to the extent of its powers, and to place the States and their respective governments and institutions at its mercy."<sup>5</sup> This, coupled with the rise of organised political factions and the spoils system, had tended to subvert the concurrent principle and to consolidate power in the hands of the general government.

The final, brief section of the Discourse contained Calhoun's remedy for the evils resulting from this situation. Despite the checks and balances which the framers had written into the Constitution, political power had accumulated in the hands of the general government. Moreover, this irresistible power was now threatening the vital interests of a large minority of the Union. The South, marked off from the rest of the United States by the peculiarity of its institutions and by an awareness of permanency of its minority status, came under attack from the radical abolitionists; it was only a matter of time, Calhoun felt, before the competing political parties would adopt abolitionist platforms in an effort to win abolitionist support and votes. To prevent this, Calhoun



maintained that the government ought to be restored to its federal character and to this end he proposed five reforms. The repeal of section 25 of the 1789 Judiciary Act was an indispensable first step, by which the individual states would regain their equal status with the federal government. The power of Congress to lay duties and to make appropriations was to be severely circumscribed in order to prevent it from exceeding its constitutional competence; the executive department would be divested of all discretionary power and held to a strict construction of the Constitution; the unofficial power of presidential patronage would be closely checked by the other branches of government. These reforms, Calhoun argued, could be accomplished by Congress acting in the interest of the general good. But one other reform - one of an organic nature - was necessary. Correction of previous abuses was crucial, but further measures were needed to ensure that similar abuses could not arise in the future. Calhoun proposed that the nature of the executive department be altered by means of a constitutional amendment to accommodate a plural executive, whereby each of the two great sections of the Union would be represented. Every bill would require the assent of both presidents before it passed into law, thus ensuring equal protection for the sections.<sup>6</sup>

Two central points emerge from the arguments of the Discourse. In the first place, Calhoun is vindicated from the charge that he was actively seeking the dissolution of the Union. The elaborate constitutional reforms that he was putting forward in the Discourse were designed to avert the danger of

dissolution by eradicating the source of the political evil. He did not condemn the framers of the original constitution for constructing a government which left loopholes through which power might be consolidated; on the contrary, he was generous in his praise of their remarkable work. They had achieved as much as could reasonably be expected of them given the information about political mechanics that they were working from. Now, it was up to later generations to determine what defects the system contained in the light of experience. Calhoun conceived his task as remedying those defects and thus continuing the work of the framers, rather than seeking to destroy it.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, his oft-repeated claim that he was evolving a "conservative" principle was true; he wished above all to preserve the essential principles of the original Constitution, even if that meant reforming some of its mechanisms.

Yet if constitutional restoration was Calhoun's professed aim, it was to be accomplished on his own terms. Towards the end of the Discourse he commented: "Ours, like all other well constituted constitutional governments, is the offspring of a conflict, timely and wisely compromised."<sup>8</sup> But in the current crisis over slavery, Calhoun was leaving no room for compromise; however moderate the proposals of the Discourse may have seemed to Calhoun, ultimately they did not constitute an appeal for compromise, but an appeal for the rules of the game to be changed. The proposals laid down in the Discourse were actually the minimum requirements demanded by the South as the price for remaining in the Union. If the South could



not obtain the guarantees she needed for her protection, then she would withdraw from the Union altogether.

The second point about the Discourse is that it is clearly not theoretical in the same sense that the Disquisition is. It deals with no abstract concepts nor does it postulate any explanation of political behaviour. Its arguments are derived entirely from constitutional history and from inferences about the intentions of the framers of the U.S. Constitution. Moreover, it is programmatic in that it advocates specific reforms of the existing system of government. Its application, so far from being universal, can only be applied to the United States, and even then only to a particular period of her history.

This substantive distinction between the Disquisition and the Discourse is by no means unimportant because it has been the source of much confusion in evaluating Calhoun's political theory. Bearing in mind Andrew Hacker's definition of political theory (that it should provide causal and ethical generalisations about political behaviour), it becomes clear that the Discourse does not qualify for this category. Its arguments are designed to meet the needs of a specific historical and cultural situation, and it is best classified under the heading of constitutional theory. The distinction may seem a semantic one, but its significance extends deeply into a proper understanding of Calhoun's political theory. As constitutional theory, the Discourse can have no greater significance than in illuminating our understanding of how the Union was viewed by one group of people at a particular moment in time. In the light of subsequent events, where that viewpoint was

defeated on the battlefields of the Civil War, its interest for us can be no more than an antiquarian one. It left no general theory of politics which could be adapted to other situations, as the Disquisition purported to do, and its arguments were rendered obsolete and outmoded by the passage of historical events. This is the single most powerful reason why the Discourse is not read today.

To recover Calhoun's political theory, then, it is necessary to concentrate on the Disquisition on Government. Although the two texts were intimately related, it is the Disquisition alone which contains what is properly called political theory.<sup>9</sup> It offers explanations of human motivation and behaviour and lays down prescriptions of ethical right, which are framed as universal generalisations; it seeks to account for the existence and nature of government and for the origin of societies. In short, the Disquisition attempts to discover, by means of scientific investigation, how governments should be constructed, given the unpredictable and mercurial nature of man. It is these basic concepts which make up Calhoun's political theory, not his detailed arguments about American constitutional history.

The confusion as to what precisely constitutes his political theory is apparent in existing studies of Calhoun's thought. Both August O. Spain and Richard N. Current insist on prefacing their remarks with an examination of the background of states' rights.<sup>10</sup> Now, while this is an understandable and appropriate procedure for examining the Discourse, the Disquisition requires a broader landscape against which Calhoun's ideas may be traced. The reason is simply this: the states'



rights doctrine is itself no more than a particular orientation of thought towards the American Constitution. Its application cannot be universal because it is deeply rooted in the fundamental law of the United States. The form of discourse it utilises is juristic rather than theoretical. This is, of course, not to deny that Calhoun both drew on and contributed to the doctrine of states' rights: the arguments of the Discourse put that question beyond dispute. What it does mean is that as a context for examining Calhoun's political theory it is inadequate, even irrelevant. The states' rights doctrine cannot tell us anything about how Calhoun's ideas of human nature, for example, were formed or how coherent they are because it does not address that type of question. Even if we look beyond the juristic content of the states' rights doctrine to its underlying philosophical principles, we find there the theory of natural rights, a set of ideas so repugnant to Calhoun that he deliberately takes time in the Disquisition to attack it. All this suggests that an alternative framework is required in which to evaluate his political ideas.

The question remains, what kind of background, what peculiar configuration of ideas, best represents the pattern of Calhoun's thinking? In The Liberal Tradition in America, Louis Hartz has suggested that the bulk of political writing which came out of the South in the decades before the Civil War, and which found its ablest expression in the writings of Calhoun and Fitzhugh, is best characterised by the phrase, "Reactionary Enlightenment".<sup>11</sup> The paradoxical conjunction of the two terms captures brilliantly the inconsistencies and tensions inherent in Calhoun's Disquisition. Hartz begins with

the premise that the American political tradition is firmly grounded on liberal foundations. The absence of a genuine feudal tradition in America meant that the Revolution of 1776, unlike its French counterpart of 1789, did not have to tear down the fabric of society in order to establish the freedom of its citizens. The great achievement of the Revolution was not its successful wresting of liberty from the hands of a tyrannical feudal elite, but the protection and consolidation of rights which Americans had traditionally enjoyed as Englishmen.<sup>12</sup> In comparison with the virulence of the French Revolution, the American one appears a very minor affair and its rhetorical battlecries out of all proportion to the alleged evils suffered by Americans at the hands of King and Parliament. Yet the vehemence with which the American colonists replied to, say, the Stamp Act - a relatively minor measure when compared with the excesses of the French ancien regime - testified to the pervasiveness of the liberal consensus. What would have been regarded as minor infringements in France, became systematic steps to tyranny in America.<sup>13</sup>

One of the effects of not having to endure a feudal structure was that America had no need to develop a genuinely radical, revolutionary tradition; not having an ancien regime to pull down, it did not bother to fashion the intellectual tools to do so. But neither did America have the experience of an authentic tradition of reaction. It had no entrenched class system to defend, no clerical domination to support, no restricted franchise to uphold.<sup>14</sup> Political and social conditions in the American colonies did not favour the transplanting of European feudal structures and it was this singular fact



which ensured the primacy of the liberal ideal. Having neither an extreme right nor an extreme left, Americans settled down comfortably with a liberal consensus which was born out of the practical necessities of the environment they inhabited. It is this ethos, maintains Hartz, which "like some ultimate Hegelian force keeps showing its face in the various aspects" of American history.<sup>15</sup>

The pervasiveness of the liberal or Lockean ethos has proved to be an intellectual straitjacket on American thought, inhibiting the development of both left- and right-wing systems of thinking. Nowhere is this intellectual tyranny more poignantly exemplified than in the attempt by Southern thinkers to evolve a set of theories in defence of slavery. Slavery as an institution was the only real vestige of feudalism to flourish in America, but even then its theoretical justification was tenuous indeed.<sup>16</sup> Thomas Jefferson, more than anyone of the revolutionary generation, typified the agony of the liberal mind confronted with the awful reality of slavery. Jefferson's solution, intellectually unsatisfying as it was, was to condemn the practice in the abstract and to hope the problem would go away of its own accord. If the wolf were kept by the ears long enough, it might just, hopefully, die of starvation.<sup>17</sup>

Jefferson's view of slavery was shared to a greater or lesser extent by his slaveholding contemporaries, though through force of economic circumstances they came to depend more and more on the profitability of the slave labour system.<sup>18</sup> It was not, however, until the wave of moral indignation swept the northern states in the 1830s that Southern thinkers were

called on to actively support the institution with reasoned and reasonable arguments. The problem then became acute; for if the intellectual defence of slavery belonged anywhere, it was in the feudal mind which America had never fully experienced and which, therefore, it could never fully understand. The southern intellect, no less than the northern, was shaped by the liberal mentality which had held so powerful a grip on American thought processes. The task that southern apologists were called on to perform was of truly gigantic proportions: to make a meaningful and coherent defence of slavery they had to transcend the confines imposed by liberal thought patterns, to somehow "get out of themselves". Of course, in doing so they would pose for themselves an even greater dilemma; if they succeeded in creating a feudal thought structure, as it were, out of nothing, they would at the same time surrender any possibility of being understood by the very people who were attacking them. Their only consolation would be that they had defended slavery to their own satisfaction, but if their primary purpose was a proselytizing one what kind of consolation would that be?<sup>19</sup>

The point was that in the 1830s and 1840s, the former Jeffersonian position was no longer tenable, even if it had been in Jefferson's own lifetime. The overriding concern of his generation had been to reaffirm and to buttress the rights Americans had traditionally enjoyed under the English Constitution; making these rights secure in the general turmoil of the transference of power was the main business before them. They were prepared to tolerate minor inconsistencies, which could be ironed out at a later date, between theory and practice,



in the interests of achieving what was practically possible at the time. Compared with the magnitude of their own contemplated bondage to the British Crown, the existence of a relatively small number of black slaves was, at least temporarily, tolerable. To the generation which succeeded them, having no pressing business like the reconstruction of a workable political system, the inconsistencies appeared glaring and no longer acceptable. If they were to live in peace with themselves and their liberal consciences, all trace of inconsistency had to be removed. The defenders of slavery thus found themselves assailed by a system of thinking which they shared with their assailants.

In the writings of Calhoun and Fitzhugh, the foremost southern apologists, the tensions caused by this intellectual conundrum are readily apparent. Unable to free themselves from the shackles imposed by the Lockean mental outlook, the social theories they produced groped towards a defence of slavery, but never really arrive at a satisfactory solution. In Calhoun's case the result was a diluted form of liberalism, peppered with inconsistencies and faulty logic. It was Fitzhugh, however, more than Calhoun who sensed the need to base the arguments in favour of slavery on pre-liberal grounds, and sensed too the stunning magnitude of the task. In 1863 he wrote: "We begin a great conservative reaction. We attempt to roll back the Reformation in its political phases."<sup>20</sup> But for Americans, rolling back the political phases of the Reformation meant going somewhere in terms of thought where they had never been before. It did not mean uncovering some lost feudal paradise, but creating one; but even if their romantic imagination could conceive it, they

lacked the intellectual equipment to construct it.

Calhoun, unlike Fitzhugh, could not conceive it even. More than Fitzhugh, Calhoun's mental universe was bounded by the limits of traditional Lockean liberalism. In the Disquisition we do not find an overt defence of slavery; instead we find the problem masquerading as a defence of minority rights. It is a measure of the stranglehold that liberal thought patterns had on his thinking that he could only address the problem in terms of liberal discourse. Calhoun begins along the right lines by dispensing with the notion of natural rights because it was to natural rights that the abolitionists made their appeal. But having done so, he immediately reintroduces a set of mechanical contrivances designed specifically to prevent government from tyrannising the individual. At one moment he gives the community the authority to determine the rights of its citizens, and the next he takes it away by imposing on it immensely complicated devices. The inconsistency is repeated throughout the Disquisition and, in Hartz's words, "is not merely striking, it is doubly and triply striking."<sup>21</sup>

This, then, is the essence of Hartz's notion of the "Reactionary Enlightenment". It portrays the profound intellectual dilemma which southern defenders of slavery faced in their attempt to evolve a systematic justification of the institution. They were reactionary in the sense that they were upholding a vestigial remnant of feudalism which was fundamentally incompatible with the ideology they professed to live by. At the same time, they lacked an authentic feudal vision which alone could supply them with the over-arching defence they needed because they could not free themselves



from the liberalism they had inherited from generations of political practice. Some, like Fitzhugh, came closer to recreating the dream than others and suffered as a consequence the ignominy of being ignored altogether. There was a curious and agonising logic involved in the dilemma: the more the proslavery writers divested themselves of their liberal preconceptions the less chance they had of being understood by other Americans for whom the liberal framework was the only point of reference. This accounts in no small way for Calhoun's continuing stature as a political theorist - his relevance is not established by his success in breaking out of the liberal mould and in conjuring up a feudal image, but by his failure to do precisely that. When Calhoun talked of the rights of the minority, he was using language which liberals understood and cherished. One has to dig deep into the Disquisition to find a defence of slavery, and even then it is fragmentary and incomplete. But this is not an indication of Calhoun's lack of commitment, only a lack of ability to find a fully-fledged and coherent defence within the liberal framework.

The crux of the Disquisition, ultimately, is this: Calhoun was either unwilling or, more likely, unable to escape the liberal ideas of John Locke which shaped his mental outlook and to pursue unhindered a full-blooded reactionary theory of slavery. At the same time he was reluctant to abandon entirely either course and attempted to fuse the two incompatible strands. All the inconsistencies and logical non sequiturs can be traced back to the uneasy co-existence of these strains of thought in the Disquisition.

On the reactionary side we have the concern to protect the institution of slavery by including in his political theory no proposition which might be inimical to a justification of it. On the other side of the same coin, there is the apparently enlightened concern to protect minorities. The problem that Calhoun found was that no unified political theory could coherently embrace both positions. It was one thing to argue the case for slavery - let alone racial slavery - but quite another to then turn around and argue that certain individuals are exempt from this scheme of things. What possible logical basis could this exemption have? If slavery is advocated in principle as being a sound basis of political organisation, logic would seem to require that it apply to all men equally. If one dispenses with the protection afforded to individuals by natural rights, on what basis can one coherently claim protection for any individual rights? Some of Calhoun's contemporaries argued that the absence of any overtly racist justification of slavery in the Disquisition indicated Calhoun's intention to establish it as a general principle for whites as well as blacks. In October 1842, the antislavery poet John Greenleaf Whittier labelled Calhoun "the dark, cold, heartless advocate of human slavery UPON PRINCIPLE - slavery, not of the black man alone, but of the laboring man everywhere, of whatever complexion."<sup>22</sup> But if this argument is justified it does not eliminate the problem, but rather makes it worse. There might have been some spurious appeal, though little logic, in arguing, as the proslavery Biblicists and ethnologists did, that the negro was biologically and theologically sub-human and therefore did not qualify for natural rights, but Calhoun



specifically rejects this course. Instead he chooses to abolish the whole notion of natural rights and thus leaves the way open for a defence of human slavery - not racial slavery - which his subsequent propositions nullify. In this is to be found the secret of Fitzhugh's apparent lucidity of thought: his notion of slavery is not a narrow, legalistic one which applied only to blacks as a means of controlling their race or of creating wealth for their masters; it was, instead, an entire social system, an Old Testament patriarchy which applied to whites as much as to blacks and in which justice and compassion could only be dispensed within a framework in which authority was unquestioned and absolute. Fitzhugh rightly perceived that there was no place for racial slavery, or indeed slavery of any kind, in a liberal, bourgeois world and he was sufficiently determined to be able to emancipate himself from the dominant American thought patterns which held these views. His repudiation of the bourgeois, capitalist ethic forms the larger coherence of his social thought.<sup>23</sup> Calhoun, however, was unable to achieve the same degree of mental emancipation as Fitzhugh, for the Disquisition attempts to reconcile the existence of slavery with the liberal ideology which seeks to destroy it.

Hartz's concept of the "reactionary Enlightenment" appears to be a more satisfactory framework in which to analyse the elements of Calhoun's political theory, though one word of warning ought to be issued at the outset. Unlike the usual categorisations in political theory which seek to emphasise the unity and consistency of a particular set of ideas, the Hartz thesis is founded on a deliberate paradox; it emphasises

rather the disintegration caused by attempting to combine into a unified whole two conflicting strains of intellectual thought. In Ideology and Utopia, Karl Mannheim has perceptively pointed out that the categories we impose on related groups of ideas necessarily contain their own logic (otherwise they would be meaningless).<sup>24</sup> In this sense, by attaching the label "Reactionary Enlightenment" to Calhoun's theory we are not pointing to his success in reconciling incompatible ideas, but to his failure. The Reactionary Enlightenment should therefore not be seen as a coherent, well worked-out ideology or system of ideas, but as a shorthand designation for the disjunctive ideas which characterise the writings of the antebellum South.

If the usefulness of the Hartz thesis is to extend beyond the coining of a felicitous paradox, it remains to be shown that its application to Calhoun's Disquisition is valid. It needs to be demonstrated that the text embodies elements of both reactionary and enlightened thinking. The process of isolating and identifying the components of either tradition, however, is not as straightforward as it may first appear. The peculiar antithetical relationship between the two systems of thought is such that we ought not to expect Calhoun to have openly embraced the inherent contradiction implied in the combining of each; we must, at least, credit Calhoun with attempting to maintain a semblance of coherence and categorical logic. What procedure, therefore, is best suited to exposing the logical tensions contained in the Disquisition? One means of achieving this is to examine the enlightenment content of the theory and to take special note



of departures from it. If, for example, it can be shown that the Disquisition is deeply imbued with Enlightenment concepts, we may legitimately inquire as to why on certain occasions Calhoun deliberately rejects major principles associated with Enlightenment thinking. His dismissal of natural rights is a case in point; already we have intimated that although Calhoun does not defend slavery openly in the Disquisition, he did recognise the need not to include in the argument any idea which might have implied a criticism, however indirect, of the institution. It is clear that if Calhoun had retained the idea of natural rights, it would have been difficult to argue that slaves did not possess such rights, except on the dubious grounds that slaves, or rather black slaves, were not actually human at all.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, Calhoun dispenses with the whole notion of natural rights - that is, individual rights - and substitutes instead the idea of the collective rights of the community and the corresponding duties of individuals.\*

In succeeding chapters we shall be examining the usefulness of the "Reactionary Enlightenment" as an explanatory concept and considering the ways in which it might be applied to Calhoun's Disquisition on Government. The procedure is as follows: since the ideas of the Disquisition which we shall be evaluating are dictated by the way in which the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment affected western patterns of thought, the remainder of this chapter is devoted to describing the substantive ideas of the Enlightenment in its European and American contexts. Thereafter, we shall investigate individually such topics as Calhoun's philosophical method, his

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\* These points are argued more fully in chapters six, seven and eight below

religious views, his ideas about human nature, progress and liberty, and finally, his celebrated theory of the concurrent majority. In each instance, we shall be considering to what extent Calhoun's ideas on these topics conform to the spirit of the Enlightenment and attempting to judge what elements of his theory may be called "reactionary". In the conclusion, we shall draw attention to certain refinements which may be made to the "Reactionary Enlightenment" as an explanatory category in order to give it a sharper focus as a conceptual tool of analysis.

(b) The style of the Enlightenment in Europe

The importance of the movement known as the Enlightenment as a turning point in the intellectual development of western culture can hardly be overestimated. To ourselves, no less than to the men who effected it, it signified the dawning of a new age, the crossing of the boundary from the gloomy world of the Middle Ages into the modern era of light and understanding. Although the optimism which accompanied this transformation has long since evaporated, the thought patterns which the Enlightenment established persist today. In a very real sense, as Paul Hazard has maintained, "it is the eighteenth century of which we are the direct and lineal descendants."<sup>26</sup>

Yet despite its importance, as an intellectual movement



the Enlightenment remains nebulous and elusive. A part of the problem is its location. At different times throughout the eighteenth century there were three centres of Enlightenment thinking - London, Paris and Edinburgh - each emphasising clusters of ideas which were most applicable to the social environment that nurtured them.<sup>27</sup> London, it is true, dominated by the towering genius of John Locke, influenced profoundly the course of the French Enlightenment, being transmitted there in the early decades of the century by Voltaire and Montesquieu.<sup>28</sup> But ideas which are transplanted from one social context to another radically different grow new and unexpected roots; in France, the cool, detached and moderate ideas of Locke became politicised to a degree unparalleled in England and were enlisted in the ideological campaign against the ancien regime. When Locke spoke of "natural rights" he was referring not only to an abstract conception, but to something concrete which Englishmen had enjoyed under a tradition of common law, and which the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had attempted to conserve. In France, however, where the Bourbon dynasty had established the most effective of autocracies, and where the notion of the rights of the citizen and subject was a meaningless concept, his ideas acquired a radical quality in the hands of the philosophes.<sup>29</sup>

Although the content of Enlightenment thinking contained local variations, subtle nuances and shifts of emphasis, it found a degree of cohesion in its underlying assumptions. The great achievement of the Enlightenment was not the formulation of a tightly-knit substantive ideology (unless one counts the destructive French anti-authoritarian one), but rather the

communication of a distinctive attitude towards all forms of knowledge, out of which fresh ideas of politics, religion and ethics could grow.<sup>30</sup> The central feature of the Enlightenment style was the belief that man could understand his place in the universe without recourse to either superstition or received authority. During the Middle Ages, intellectual activity had effectively been concentrated in the hands of a priestly class which, with the support of autocratic governments, had ruthlessly enforced a religious and political orthodoxy. All thinking, including political and scientific inquiry, took place within a theological context and was made to conform to the accepted orthodoxy laid down by the ecclesiastical establishment. The doctrine of original sin was the starting point for all theorising; man's natural corruption and the need to seek redemption was the premise on which the medieval mentality was founded. In politics it led to a justification of absolutism: man, being naturally sinful, needed a strong government ordained by God to keep his baseness in check.<sup>31</sup>

In eighteenth century France, where the medieval ethos was most securely established under the ancien regime, the rejection of superstition and authority, when it came, was fused into a violent anti-clericalism.<sup>32</sup> The priestly class, as a privileged and politically powerful minority as well as being the official keepers of religious dogma, drew the harshest fire from the zealous philosophes of the French Enlightenment. But criticism of priestly domination was not confined to France; in his essay, What Is Enlightening?, Immanuel Kant urged men to shake off the inertia which allowed them to



surrender their responsibility to think for themselves to the religious elite.<sup>33</sup> Kant, like his French counterparts, was primarily attacking the authority of the priests and the intellectual tyranny they imposed, but it was only a short step away from attacking the very foundations of the Christian faith itself. Some extreme French writers, like La Mettrie and Baron d'Holbach, were more openly atheistic in their critiques; to d'Holbach, Christianity was no more than a "castle in the air", and the principles of theology "only hazardous suppositions, imagined by ignorance, propoagated by enthusiasm or knavery, adopted by timid incredulity, preserved by custom which never reasons, and revered solely because not understood."<sup>34</sup>

d'Holbach's polemic against organised Christianity, for all its invective, reflected accurately the major preoccupations of the Enlightenment style. In the first place, there was the powerful belief that mankind had reached a stage in its history where blind faith could be replaced by true understanding, where "hazardous suppositions" were banished in favour of certain knowledge. Thomas Paine gave the Enlightenment its alternative title when he wrote The Age of Reason, but in some ways this is a misnomer, for "reason" in the Cartesian sense was never strictly a part of Enlightenment thinking.<sup>35</sup> Certainly the influence of Descartes' system of methodical doubt was apparent in the writings of the philosophes, but it was his mistrust of received knowledge rather than his pure rationalism that they found appealing. The Enlightenment style is perhaps better represented as "the age of understanding" because it attempted to apply the assumptions and methods of natural

science to the study of man and society; its aim was to discover as far as possible the true relations between man and the environment he inhabited.

The greatest contribution that the scientific advances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made was not so much in the area of new discoveries, but in the formulation of an epistemology through which new discoveries could be assimilated. In this respect, the work of Francis Bacon is outstanding. Bacon, largely in reaction to the pure rationalism of the medieval scholastic tradition (which had followed Aristotle in teasing out the logical consequences of definitions of objects in the world), had maintained that true scientific inquiry consisted of the patient observation of events in the natural, observable world and the construction of tentative explanatory theories which could be verified by repeated experiment. Formal logic alone was insufficient because however valid a purely rational hypothesis might be, there was no way of establishing its truth, or at least, its correspondence with observed reality. In place of pure, unaided reason as the means to knowledge, Bacon substituted the experimental method of empirical induction; the true scientist did not begin by setting up certain general principles or axioms and then move, by abstract inference, to particular instances of fact, but quite the reverse - he began with the data of experience and observation and after repeated experiment, proceeded to formulate covering principles which would account for all aspects of the behaviour of the object under study. The stress that Bacon laid on a proper scientific method reflected his concern to establish the realm of certain knowledge not in a priori deductive systems



but in the natural environment of man. The experimental method, "the architecture of the sciences", was the only reliable way in which order could be brought out of chaos and in which man could come to understand the forces which governed his life.<sup>36</sup>

If Bacon supplied the method of modern scientific inquiry, it was Newton who applied it in his synthesis of natural physics, and thereby gave to the Enlightenment its most important impulse. In the Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy (1686), Newton presented an all-encompassing view of the universe as operating according to fixed laws which interlocked harmoniously, and which were discoverable by the Baconian method of induction. In the Newtonian world view, the intricacies and infinite variety of nature became intelligible to the human mind by the formulation of organising principles, or laws, which could be refined and adapted to take new evidence and data into account.<sup>37</sup> The accumulation of scientific knowledge thus took on the appearance of a systematic search for certainty in the field of natural phenomena, rather than the discrete and disjointed collection of valid, but not necessarily true, logical hypotheses.<sup>38</sup>

I have spoken at some length about the scientific advances made by Bacon and Newton because the methods and assumptions they developed informed almost every area of Enlightenment thinking in the eighteenth century. The intellectual debt that the philosophes owed these pioneers was acknowledged in the extravagant praises they heaped upon Newton especially. Newton, in fact, became deified by the writers of the Enlightenment; in poetry and prose they celebrated his

massive achievement in showing the way forward to a true understanding of the natural world. The lines of Alexander Pope,

Nature and Nature's laws lay hid in night.  
God said, Let Newton be! and all was Light.

became a cliché of the adoration they conferred on the scientist. Voltaire, eschewing the poetic literary convention, simply declared him to be "the greatest man who ever lived."<sup>39</sup> Such examples were repeated endlessly in the writings of philosophes of all countries.<sup>40</sup>

The attraction of the Newtonian system for the writers of the Enlightenment lay both in its method and its assumptions. By assuming that the universe was orderly, in the sense that it did not deviate from certain regular patterns of behaviour, and that by means of patient observation, coupled with common-sense, those patterns could be perceived by the human mind, Newton was providing a complete model of rational explanation which could be fruitfully applied to all areas of human knowledge. If material objects were seen to conform to fixed patterns of behaviour, was it not likely that similar regularities existed in the realm of moral choice? And if so, would not the experimental method of induction reveal set standards of moral behaviour? It was this exciting prospect that generated the optimistic spirit of the Enlightenment more than anything else. By adapting the techniques of science to all areas of human endeavour, the philosophes believed that they had found the way towards systematic knowledge of everything that was worth knowing. Long-established and cherished opinions on a wide variety of activities were drawn into the vortex and subjected to critical scientific analysis. Thus, d'Alembert, co-editor



with Diderot of the Encyclopedie, could write in that most illustrious organ of the Enlightenment that "from the principles of the secular sciences to the foundations of revelation, from metaphysics to matters of taste, from music to morality, from the scholastic disputes of theologians to commercial subjects, from the rights of princes to those of peoples, from natural law to the arbitrary laws of nations, in a word from those questions which touch us most deeply to those which concern us least, everything has been discussed, analysed or at least brought into question."<sup>41</sup>

Although Newton had himself implied that his system was adaptable to other branches of knowledge, he had left the development of these ideas to his close friend John Locke.<sup>42</sup> In the Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689), Locke turned the scientific method onto the investigation of the human mind itself and onto the nature of knowing. The basic principles of epistemology which Locke laid down in the Essay were essentially empirical: ideas, so far from being innate as the medieval tradition had postulated, were in fact derived from the senses. The mind, Locke maintained, is a tabula rasa on which experience either of the external world or of its own operations, imprints ideas. The basic and irreducible components of thought, the simple ideas, are reflections of the outside world perceived by the mind through the senses, and complex ideas are built up by piecing together these basic components. Although Locke denied the existence of innate ideas, he was careful to point out that there was a category of ideas which he called "self-evident", by which he meant that "the mind perceives the agreement or disagreement of two ideas immediately

by themselves, without the intervention of any other; and this I think we may call intuitive knowledge."43

Locke's adaptation of the Newtonian method to the realm of psychology and epistemology provided the invaluable connection between scientific inquiry and the diverse branches of study. The prospect of accumulating certain knowledge inspired the Enlightenment thinkers with an optimism which pervades their writings and which became one of their most distinctive characteristics. Bacon had stated an important truth when he said that knowledge was power, and for the philosophes the possibility of attaining complete knowledge signified, too, unlimited power to control man's destiny.<sup>44</sup> By being able to understand the complex operations of Nature, it became possible to harness her resources for the benefit of mankind generally. The area in which this was most directly and obviously applicable was medicine<sup>45</sup> - true, scientific, empirical medicine, not the superstitious astrology and alchemy which had reigned in the Middle Ages - but the philosophes did not confine their optimism to the physical and chemical sciences alone. In the political sphere they applied the general criterion of utility - that is, the greatest happiness of the greatest number - as the guiding principle on which governments should operate. A scientific appraisal of human nature, the raw elements of politics, would show the way in which this could best be realised. The general mood of optimism which characterised the Enlightenment's substantive contributions, itself became systematised into a supposedly scientific theory of progress. Turgot, surveying the course of world history in the Discours aux Sorboniques (1750) was able to proclaim that "the totality of humanity,



fluctuating between calm and agitation, good times and bad, moves steadily though slowly towards a greater perfection."<sup>46</sup> "Perfection" in the enlightened sense of the word, did not simply mean material progress but also the moral improvement of man himself. Condorcet found good reasons in the spirit of the age for believing that there was no limit to the moral, intellectual and even physical perfectability of man.<sup>47</sup>

The surge of optimism which the scientific revolution unleashed stood in stark contrast to the gloomy pessimism of medieval religious dogma, which emphasised the inherent sinfulness of man. Man, tainted by the sin of his first parents, was a helpless being unable to restore himself by his own feeble endeavours to a right relationship with God. His primary concern, so the various Churches taught, was to live by faith in the hope that God's infinite mercy might envelope him at the moment of death and preserve his soul in perfect bliss throughout eternity. This preoccupation with the hereafter, coupled with the eschatological belief that the Kingdom of God on earth was at hand, infused a spirit of resigned submissiveness to the things of this world which the Church - Catholic and Protestant - encouraged.<sup>48</sup> So far from being a perfectible creature, man was continually reminded of his sinfulness and unworthiness before God; moreover, any attempt to improve his condition on earth merely compounded the error, for the stain of sin was uneraseable and infected everything he touched.

The religious opinions of the Enlightenment writers were profoundly influenced by the scientific world-view, though it produced little unanimity other than the universal condemnation of medieval dogma. Bacon, Locke and Newton - especially Newton -

had all been devout believers in the existence and goodness of God, and their work had largely been inspired by the desire to understand the world He had created.<sup>49</sup> Yet the irony of the scientific method they formulated was that it demanded rigorous standards of evidence and proof, based on systematic observation and repeated experiment, before proceeding to frame hypotheses. In the hands of the philosophes, where the scientific method was extended to other branches of inquiry, including speculation on the existence of God, a strain of sceptical thought arose which ranged from the benign deism of Voltaire to the violent atheism of d'Holbach. Voltaire, less atheistic than he is often given credit for, in some ways resembles Newton in his religious convictions: he saw in the symmetrical harmony of Nature evidence of design, and hence, of a Designer.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, it is this metaphor, of the master mechanic or master clockmaker, that most nearly characterises the religious temper of the age.<sup>51</sup> The image of God as a wrathful, intervening Sovereign Lord was remoulded to suit the prevailing rationalistic frames of thinking. Some, of course, pushing the empirical method more relentlessly in the direction of positivism, dispensed with God altogether. Helvetius's Atheist, in the Conversation between a Deist and an Atheist (1765) summed up this position: "A philosopher should believe only when he is forced to it by overwhelming proof. I reason only on the basis of what I see, and, in the whole of nature, I see nothing but immeasurable matter and a boundless force."<sup>52</sup> Few were prepared to go to such extremes, mainly because they found no need to; liberating mankind from medieval superstition and received authority meant repudiating the doctrine and practice of the



Church, but not necessarily calling into doubt God's existence. God was allowed to remain in their cosmology, but only on their terms, as the passive, non-intervening Author of Nature.<sup>53</sup>

Nature, indeed, replaced God as the object of the philosophes' veneration. God was one step removed from the scene, but Nature and its forces were what men had to contend with in their daily lives. The surest foundation of human knowledge, and knowledge of God too, was an understanding of the Nature He had created; knowing God depended not on the revelation of the Scriptures, but on the revelation of Nature as it was progressively revealed to the human mind. Conceived in this light, God lost the sectarian quality which had characterised Him in the Middle Ages: he was no longer the Hebraic YHWH or the Christian Lord, but the Supreme Being, knowable not to an exclusive and privileged few, but to all men who would but use their minds. Voltaire, again, expressed the universality of the idea of God-in-Nature:

Last night, I was meditating, absorbed in the contemplation of Nature. I was filled with wonder at its immensity, at the stars in their courses, at the mutual interaction of those countless orbs, one upon another, which people looked upon unmoved. And I marvelled still more at the Mind which governs the whole mighty scheme. A man must be blind, I said to myself, not to be dazzled by such a spectacle, a fool not to acknowledge its Author, a madman not to adore him. What tribute of adoration can I pay him? Must it not be the same, wherever it is offered? Whatever thinking being inhabits the Milky Way owes him the like homage. The light shines for Sirius, even as it shines for us. 54

If God manifested himself in Nature, the philosophes

reasoned that Nature must be both beneficent and right, and that the proper study of natural processes would reveal a true guide to living. In terms of political thought this proved to be awkward, for if Nature (understood empirically) decreed a blueprint to which all human institutions, including the political, should conform, did this not provide a sanction for the status quo? Scientific study of physical phenomena revealed fixed laws of behaviour in the material world, and the philosophes hoped that the application of scientific methods to social institutions would reveal similar laws in that sphere. But by that token they would have had to admit that historical experience demonstrated that man, so far from being a freedom-loving animal, was more or less content to live in subjection under absolute governments. Kant had spelled it out in What Is Enlightening? when he maintained that man found it less irksome to forego the responsibility of thinking for himself: thinking required sustained effort, and man, more often than not, was prepared to renounce that effort and recline happily in ignorance.

The Enlightenment's method of scientific empiricism seemed to clash with their cherished ideal of liberty, for wherever they looked in history, they could not find a factual basis for human freedom. Man might have been born free, as Rousseau had contended (even though that in itself was a dubious claim), but "everywhere he is in chains."<sup>55</sup> No impartial reading of history could conclude otherwise. The same was true of their notion of equality - a fine ideal, perhaps, but unsanctioned in Nature. What J.R.Pole has recently written of the American Enlightenment, applies as



well to its European forerunner: its "moral system... constituted a closed circuit. The great difficulty in grounding it [equality] into moral life was that it purported to derive its conclusions from observations which in fact conflicted with them. Observation did not show that all men were equally endowed even in respect of those attributes required to protect their equal rights...."<sup>56</sup> The dilemma was considerable: either they held on to their method, in which case they would have had to admit that, empirically-speaking, slavery was the condition that nature had seemed to decree for man or else they could elevate liberty and equality into moral axioms, self-evident a priori truths, and thereby agree to live with the inconsistency of paying lip-service to the empirical method. Characteristically, the Enlightenment writers chose the path of compromise, or, as Peter Gay has said, "they preferred effectiveness to consistency",<sup>57</sup> and this trait speaks volumes about their polemical style, for ultimately the movement was distinctive as much for its preconceived values as it was for its supposedly neutral and scientific method. In their search, for example, for a coherent argument in favour of universal liberty they returned to the medieval conception of Natural Law, a rationalist construct which their empirical temper should have led them to reject. Indeed, to salve their consciences, they did make an effort to waive the more exotic moral fictions implied in natural law theory, but this merely reinforced the sense of inconsistency; David Hume was willing to accept the moral consequences of a fictitious state of nature so long as it was remembered that the actual condition itself was "fallacious and sophistical".<sup>58</sup> It might

be argued that the transmutation of the medieval conception of Natural Law at the hands of the Enlightenment writers, into the modernised doctrine of Natural Rights, constituted the creation of a generically new political conception. This, however, is hardly tenable for the critical element of both medieval Natural Law and Natural Rights was the belief that there existed a form of law which was superior to the positive law of states and which provided a standard of moral behaviour which was binding on rulers and subjects alike. The existence of an objective standard of behaviour, whether it derived from God or Nature, was the crucial factor in both cases. How this law was discoverable was left purposefully vague, for to claim that it was knowable by pure reason, as the medieval scholastics did, was too great a betrayal of the empirical method for the Enlightenment to stomach.<sup>59</sup>

The philosophes were never happy with their compromise over Natural Law, even though it was its rhetorical appeal that they were most interested in. Their attachment to certain preconceived social and political values was as great as their devotion to scientific empiricism; indeed, freedom of thought and inquiry was an essential precondition of the rigorous, questioning scientific method. Yet when utilitarian doctrines began to emerge in France in the 1750s, the philosophes eagerly seized the opportunity to bring their epistemology into line with their values. Utilitarian ideas enabled them to discard entirely their dependence on a priori abstractions and to base their ideas on more solidly empirical foundations.<sup>60</sup>

In this section we have looked at some of the dominant



ideas of the Enlightenment style, though we have by no means exhausted the list of areas into which their thinking penetrates. It is perhaps as a style, or a distinctive attitude, that the Enlightenment is best represented rather than for any one overriding idea or set of ideas. It connoted, above all, a fresh way of looking at the world and of assimilating new knowledge, and questioning old. With the discovery of the "new way of ideas" came an optimism which expressed itself in a more rational approach to religion and in a more tender regard for human rights and liberties. In Europe, emerging from the medieval mentality, the optimism of the Enlightenment acquired an intoxicating quality in its belief that no area of knowledge was shut off to the human mind. Knowledge, too, once gained could be put to practical use: in medicine, in scientific invention, but also in politics and ethics. Knowledge to the philosophes was "useful knowledge" (as the Victorians might have said) in that it could be applied in such a way as to increase the sum of human happiness. The philosophes were acutely aware of their role in propagating the new ideas; they were under no illusions as to the originality of their thinking - they saw themselves as popularisers, radiating the ideas of other more profound thinkers into the mainstream of common thought.<sup>61</sup> It was to the American colonies that the European Enlightenment looked with hopefulness to see its vision fulfilled. There they saw a people unencumbered with the burdens of a decadent feudalism, sensitive to their rights as men and possessing a vast expanse of land to explore and to exploit. America was "the redemptive land which had escaped European corruptions and [had] recovered the

the liberty of nature."<sup>62</sup> Soon, Americans themselves came to recognise that they were "aptly circumstanced to form the best republics upon the best terms that ever came to the lot of any people before us."<sup>63</sup>

### (c) The Style of the Enlightenment in America

In America, as in Europe, the Enlightenment represented a style rather than a single cohesive doctrine, but a style which nonetheless held a singularly powerful grasp on the American imagination. In Europe - and in France particularly - the self-conscious excitement engendered by the "new way of ideas" was as much due to their novelty as it was to the intrinsic value of the ideas themselves. Standing in such stark contrast to the superstitious and authoritarian ideas which underpinned the ancien regime, they could not fail to have the intoxicating effect they did. The context into which Enlightenment ideas penetrated the American colonies was, however, quite different from France, for there was no sharp and cataclysmic break with past thought-patterns. Many of the religious and political ideas which prevailed in mid-eighteenth America, and which we have come to associate with the style of the Enlightenment, were actually natural outgrowths of sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritanism, and as such acquired a matter-of-fact quality. The American Revolution, to be sure, echoed the enthusiasm of French litterateurs, but it was the



enthusiasm of men putting ideas into effect rather than proposing them for detached discussion.<sup>64</sup>

Both the intellectual climate and the social circumstances of the American colonies provided a suitable environment for Enlightenment ideas. In place of a decadent feudal regime, the American colonial experience was informed by the Puritan mind.<sup>65</sup> Puritanism, despite its reputation for austere theocentrism and the rigid enforcement of religious orthodoxy, contained strands of thought which, when developed fully, would give rise to peculiarly enlightened ideas. Curiously, it was the strength of the Puritans' religious convictions that enabled them to explore ideas which were potentially destructive of their theocentric world-view. Believing unquestioningly in God's omnipotence as Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, they were led to investigate all aspects of the human condition without fear of the direction their studies might lead them. This attitude is most clearly apparent in their treatment of education and science. For decades before Newton's Principia was published, America Puritans had been following closely the scientific advances made in medicine, physics and astronomy.<sup>66</sup> No less than eleven New England Puritans were elected Fellows of the Royal Society in London. In 1721, a clinical treatise on inoculation against smallpox was published in the Transactions of the Royal Society, based on experiments carried out in Boston and championed by Cotton Mather.<sup>67</sup>

To the Puritan intellect, scientific investigation of the natural world was neither impious nor contrary to Scripture because God had created both kinds of revelation for the instruction and edification of mankind. Puritanism was not

simply a religious attitude, but a complete intellectual system in which all created existence found an explanation in God's authorship. Science was therefore not viewed as an alternative to religion, but as a supplement. Cotton Mather's Essay XVI "Of Thunder and Lightning" exemplified the Puritan combination of searching inquiry and pious reverence: Mather begins his essay by discussing the natural processes whereby thunder and lightening occur, referring to the scientific experiments of Dr. Hook and Dr. Wallis. But, continues Mather, "The natural Causes of the Thunder do not at all release me from considering the Interest and Providence of the Glorious GOD, concerned in it."<sup>68</sup> Mather was thus making the distinction, which all the Puritans made, between understanding the process of how thunder and lightening occur and understanding why it occurs. To the latter question there was no doubt of the answer: it happened because God made it to happen, but that did not absolve man from using his mind to discover how it occurred.

The Puritan preoccupation with improving the mind found practical expression in the establishment of educational institutions, the most famous of which was Harvard College in Massachusetts. As early as the 1640s, the Harvard curriculum displayed a breadth of learning which was remarkable; undergraduate students were required to study logic, ethics, politics, physics, arithmetic, geometry and astronomy as well as the formal elements of grammar and rhetoric. Students at Harvard were, however, left in no doubt of the central importance accorded to theology: "Let every Student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well, the main end of his



life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life, Joh.17.3 and therefore to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning."<sup>69</sup> The single requirement for the awarding of a Bachelor's degree was that the candidate "is found able to read the Originals of the Old and New Testament into the Latin tongue, and to resolve them Logically."<sup>70</sup> The Puritans thus found no inherent incompatibility in the blending of theology with a liberal arts education, for the two were indissolubly linked: all knowledge flowed from God who had given man the ability to comprehend the environment in which he lived. To the Puritans, a wilful disregard of God's bountiful gift would have been a sign of rebelliousness no less sinful than neglecting to pay Him due reverence and worship. John Cotton, Minister of Boston, declared that "To study the nature and course, and use of all God's Works, is a duty imposed by God upon all sorts of men; from the King that sitteth upon the Throne to the Artificer...."<sup>71</sup>

The Puritan acceptance of science and learning as a part of God's endowment to man meant that one of the major barriers to enlightened thinking was absent in the American colonies. In Europe, scientific investigation and artistic expression, when it was allowed at all, was made to conform to religious precepts promulgated by the Church and enforced by ascetic religious orders.<sup>72</sup> The suppression of scientific tracts and the persecution of individual scientists underlined the sense of suspicion which the Church entertained towards the ideas of dangerous "innovators".<sup>73</sup> In Puritan America, scientific inquiry was regarded as a positive benefit for man

and also as a divine obligation, to be used to draw closer to an understanding of the Universe God had created. Of course, the Scriptures remained the primary and ultimate authority for the Puritans in all areas of life, but it was not difficult for theologians to <sup>find</sup> biblical sanction for the use of the mind in determining ethical, political or scientific questions.<sup>74</sup> This in itself was a prelude to the American Enlightenment, for it signified a fearless attitude to new ideas which, though firmly rooted within a theological context, could develop along secular lines.

Political and social conditions in colonial America also favoured the development of Enlightenment ideas, and again, in this respect, it is the absence of feudalism which is notable. Bernard Bailyn has pointed out that Enlightenment ideas were easily assimilated into colonial thinking precisely because many of the social reforms that European writers had been contending for had already been realised in practice in America. The great achievement of the Revolution was actually the ideological transformation it effected by bringing political theory into line with what had already occurred in practice.<sup>75</sup> The formal abolition of primogeniture and entail, for example, which was accomplished during the revolutionary period, was in fact nothing more than recognition of what had already occurred earlier in the century by natural means. The aristocracies of France and England had relied heavily on primogeniture as the legal device by which estates of land were transmitted by lineal descent, thus ensuring the perpetuation of privilege for a few landed families. In the American colonies, where land was plentiful and thus inexpensive, the concentration of social



wealth in the hands of a privileged minority was a remote prospect. Nevertheless, it was a part of the anti-aristocratic rhetoric of the American Revolution that formal hereditary devices be legally terminated: by 1786 every state of the new Union had abolished or rendered innocuous the principle of entailment and primogeniture was similarly abolished by 1792.<sup>76</sup> The effect of these measures was not to alter established practices so much as to legitimise the changes which had naturally taken place as the result of transplanting English institutional practices to a wholly different environment in America. A similar example is that of the franchise. In England, the franchise was accorded only to freeholders - a provision which effectively meant that a significant proportion of the population was deprived of the right to vote. In the colonies, however, where the abundance of land meant that almost all adult males were freeholders, the provision could hardly be described as restrictive.<sup>77</sup>

Tolerance in matters of religion - a central plank in the reforming programme of the European Enlightenment - was, in America by the time of the Revolution, more or less an accomplished fact. Although at the beginning of the 1770s, legal provision existed in all the colonies to ensure the supremacy of one or other religious sect, in practice religious discrimination was mild and tolerant.<sup>78</sup> In Virginia, where the Church of England was established by law, dissent was tolerated well beyond the English Act of Toleration; dissenters were required to be licensed by law, but they were not prevented from devising and practicing their own forms of worship. They were exempt from paying parish taxes and they were not barred

from the franchise.<sup>79</sup> It would be easy to overstate the extent of religious freedom in the colonies prior to the Revolution, but nevertheless the heterogeneity of religious practices made toleration a practical necessity for minorities forced to live together. Toleration in this sense did not mean an acceptance of denominational differences on points of doctrine, but the absence of active and systematic persecution. During the Revolution, provisions for establishing formal religious freedom took on the appearance of a mopping up operation, bringing legislation into line with what already existed in practice.<sup>80</sup>

There are good grounds for believing, therefore, that the colonial experience furnished a suitable environment for Enlightenment ideas or even that the American Enlightenment developed independently of the influence of European ideas, as it were out of the "mundane exigencies of the situation."<sup>81</sup> It is certainly true that Enlightenment ideas in America bore the unmistakable stamp of her social conditions: lacking the intellectual facilities of Europe, and hence the luxury of discussing ideas for their own sake, Americans were forced to calculate the value of such ideas on the basis of their usefulness in practice.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish the ideas which were indigenous to the colonies and which were transmitted there from Europe.

Much recent scholarship has been concerned with identifying the sources of the American Enlightenment.<sup>83</sup> Henry F. May has reminded us that that the American Enlightenment comprehends more than the ideas and events of the Revolutionary period, and that for most of the eighteenth century Americans had been



importing ideas from Europe.<sup>84</sup> May has divided the Enlightenment in America into four overlapping phases, though for our purposes we shall be concerned with the first three only. In the first phase, which extended from the late seventeenth century through to the American Revolution, Enlightenment ideas filtered through to the colonies in the form of the works of British philosophers, especially Newton and Locke (though it was Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding rather than his Two Treatises on Government which Americans seized upon primarily.) This "Moderate Enlightenment", as May terms it, reflected the intellectual climate of England with its emphasis on orderliness and balance in politics and religion. Its restrained optimism, moreover, was portrayed in the cautious acceptance of the scientific method as a further means of demonstrating the benevolent design of God. The Moderate Enlightenment in America, as in England, stood in marked contrast to the radical scepticism which developed among some French writers; neither America nor England produced an atheist of comparable stature or influence to rival a d'Holbach. The intellectual sway that England held over America proved sufficiently strong to deter widespread dissemination of radical French ideas which formed the second phase of the American Enlightenment. From 1750 to 1789, May argues, the centre of the European Enlightenment gravitated away from London towards Paris, where the moderate implications of the scientific method became fashioned into a tool of social criticism. The influence of French ideas - particularly its extreme form of religious scepticism - was limited in America for many reasons. In the first place, although many well-

educated Americans had some knowledge of the French language, it was superficial and insufficient to guide them through the intricacies of Enlightenment passion and rhetoric.<sup>85</sup> Another, more compelling reason was that despite their protestations that they were proposing concrete reforms, the works of the French writers seemed doctrinaire and utopian. Americans, it is true, shared the French enchantment with applied science and technology, and members of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia corresponded with their French colleagues in this field,<sup>86</sup> but that was the extent of Franco-American cooperation. In matters of religion, French ideas appeared more radical than they actually were, coloured no doubt by the passionate atheism of men like d'Holbach and La Mettrie. But whatever the reason, Americans found little need to go beyond the rational and reasonable deism of English freethinkers. The predominantly French "Sceptical Enlightenment" (again, it is May's term) had relatively little lasting effect on American thinking.

It was the third phase of the Enlightenment - the "Revolutionary Enlightenment" - which left the deepest impression on American patterns of thinking, and crystallised many of the disparate strands which were already present in the American consciousness into a unified doctrine. America's war of independence acted as a catalyst on the various ideas which had been imported during the course of the eighteenth century; again, and ironically, it was the influence of British writers which was decisive. Bernard Bailyn and Caroline Robbins have convincingly argued that the single most important source of revolutionary theory was a group of disaffected "opposition" polit-



icians and pamphleteers which from the end of the seventeenth century had been persistently haranguing successive British governments.<sup>87</sup> These writers, men like Algernon Sidney, John Trenchard, Thomas Gordon and Bishop Hoadly, were united in their opposition to ministerial power conferred by the Crown; they drew the substance of their criticism from the radical tradition of the commonwealth period. The main thrust of their ideas was the belief that the English Constitution, of which they were justly proud, was in danger of being subverted by the close connection between the Crown and Parliament. The primary function of Parliament, as they saw it, was to safeguard the liberties of the people against the encroachments of the Crown. The King's prerogative in choosing and in dismissing his ministers at will, effectively meant that they were responsible to the Crown and not to Parliament, and hence matters of public policy were dependent on the will of the monarch. The Commonwealthmen argued that to ensure individual liberty and proper constitutional accountability, the executive and legislative branches of the government ought to be more fully separated. It was, in effect, another phase in the argument for constitutional government.<sup>88</sup>

Few of the radical whigs achieved election to Parliament, which in no small measure accounts for their literary rather than parliamentary style. In pamphlets and newspapers, and in Societies specially formed for the purpose, they excoriated the government and presented extreme libertarian views.<sup>89</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century successive generations of radicals continued to disseminate their ideas, though to little effect in England. In America, however, their writings were devoured

avidly and reprinted over and over again, and served to inspire many of the leaders of the Revolution. From the 1720s onwards the speed with which English radical ideas appeared in American pamphlets and newspapers testified both to the special relevance of America's English heritage and to the peculiar political divergencies between the mother-country and her transatlantic colonies. Cato's Letters, written by John Trenchard, first appeared in the London Journal in 1720, though it attracted little attention outside radical circles in England. Less than eleven months later, however, the Letters were being serialised in James Franklin's New England Courant from which time they seem to have been constantly in print. They were quoted extensively in the writings of Americans for the following seven decades.<sup>90</sup>

The popularity of English radical writings in America derived in large part from the changed political conditions in the colonies. The constant tension between colonial legislatures and the Royal Governors sent to administer colonial affairs, made the radical argument for separation of legislative and executive functions more relevant to the American experience than could be imagined in England. Certainly, English constitutional opinion universally subscribed to the theory of the separation of powers as the surest means of safeguarding individual liberty, but as a description of the actual working of the English constitution it was inaccurate; the harmony of English politics was achieved not through any formal separation of powers, but through an unarticulated though well-understood agreement on certain crucial issues.<sup>91</sup> It was generally agreed, for example, that the arbitrary power of the Crown should be



limited to constitutional procedures, though the King's right to appoint and dismiss ministers did not imply a formal separation of powers.

The tacit constitutional compromises worked out in England did not, however, extend to the colonies. There, the Royal Governors used the power of veto more extensively than the King did in England; furthermore, all colonial legislation was scrutinised by the Privy Council in London before it could receive the Royal Assent - hence, a double opportunity existed within the imperial structure for negating the will of the legislatures. In the most sensitive area of the administration of justice, the Royal Governors exercised powers which were specifically denied to the Crown: they appointed and dismissed judges, and could create new courts at will. In their relationship with the legislatures, they exercised a more absolute control than the sovereign in that they could prorogue and dissolve the assemblies virtually at will. In England, it was accepted that the King's right to dissolve Parliament should only be exercised when the House of Commons refused to sustain his ministers and their policies. In these areas, then, any resemblance between the structure of colonial government and the English Constitution was entirely superficial; indeed, if colonial government resembled anything it was the English Constitution prior to the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The writings of the English radicals in the late eighteenth century, out of tune with prevailing political opinion in their own country, found in the colonies an audience which understood from their own experience the arbitrariness of imperial government and which was eager to seize the arguments they offered.<sup>92</sup>

But what exactly were their arguments? Colin Bonwick has maintained that radical ideology "comprised not a logically integrated system but an amalgam of moral principles and political ideals that gave philosophic purpose to the state and provided a set of normative values through which fundamental beliefs could be assimilated in specific situations."<sup>93</sup> At bottom, these writers shared many of the assumptions of Enlightenment thought, though in a more restrained English version: Harrington, John Milton, Algernon Sidney and Locke were the main sources of their ideas, though frequently new emphases were given. Central to their beliefs about government and society was the fundamental premise that the universe was orderly and intelligible to the human mind, but again, as with other Enlightenment writers, emphasis was laid on reason coupled with observation. In the writings of Richard Price and Joseph Priestly the search for concrete historical evidence to support their moral and political arguments is especially apparent. But nevertheless, they were moral arguments and no amount of empirical veneer could disguise the fact: they accepted the existence of a universal moral order, ordained by God and apparent in Nature, to which human institutions ought, as far as possible, conform.<sup>94</sup>

Liberty, to the English radicals, was undoubtedly the brightest jewel in their intellectual crown. The natural order of the universe, they reasoned, demonstrated that man, though he was palpably not so, ought to be free to enjoy the rights which God had bestowed on him. Among these rights, according to Richard Price, were the freedom to determine one's actions according to the judgement of one's conscience and the freedom



to determine one's actions without the intervention of another's will. Liberty in these matters could only be achieved if the individual were guaranteed political and civil liberty. Essentially, the radicals' arguments for liberty were a restatement of Lockean doctrines of natural rights and social contract, and it seems reasonable that we should take the ideas of Locke as paradigmatic of his later publicists. Locke had argued that each individual had held within his own person, by virtue of his humanity, a certain category of rights which derived directly from God, and which consequently no human power could legitimately abridge. Among these "natural" rights Locke listed the rights to life, liberty and property as being inalienable endowments to man. (The concept of inalienability is important because it connoted not simply the illegitimacy of depriving an individual of his rights, but also the illegitimacy of an individual voluntarily resigning his rights to another, since, properly speaking, they were not his to resign.) In order to emphasise the inviolability of natural rights, Locke built his social theory on the philosophical device of the state of nature.<sup>95</sup> He maintained that prior to the formation of society, men had existed as dissociated individuals in "a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man."<sup>96</sup> The one limiting factor on an individual's freedom of action was the "law of nature", which Locke characterised as human rationality.<sup>97</sup> Each individual was divinely endowed with the faculty of reason which enabled him to perceive

himself and his fellows as being the created property of God. No one, therefore, held the right to deprive any other person of his life, liberty or estate because these gifts came from God the Creator directly.

To Locke, the Law of Nature was an adequate means of regulating human affairs so long as each individual lived according to the dictates of his reason. The problem arose when men laid aside the law of nature and allowed their unbridled passions of greed and self-love to set the tone of their actions. The inevitable conflict which proceeded from such a state of war was punishable - but by whom? God's judgement would be rendered at the end of time or at the moment of death, but in either case this was a long-term prospect which lacked the immediacy the situation demanded. Locke proposed that since there was no visible divine power to which appeal could be immediately made, it had to be the right of each individual in the state of nature to punish offenders; each man, therefore, became his own judge and was empowered to enforce the law of nature.<sup>98</sup>

It was the inconvenience of this state of affairs which made civil society necessary. Man's natural rights had to be protected in a more concrete and efficient manner than the state of nature would allow. In the first place, the law of nature would have to be set down so that all would know and recognise it. Then, an impartial and identifiable arbiter would be established to settle disputes between individuals according to the law. Finally, an independent power would be invested with authority to execute the law. All these provisions could only be effectively accomplished within the frame-



work of a civil community.<sup>99</sup>

The social contract was the legal and philosophical mechanism by which society was brought into being; the term "contract" was aptly used since it implied the existence of mutual obligations voluntarily concluded. The dissociated individuals of the state of nature would voluntarily agree to surrender their sovereignty of action and bind themselves together into a social community. The powers that they surrender would be placed at the collective disposal of the community as a whole, to be used by its agent, the government. In return for all this, the community was obliged to insure the best possible conditions for the citizens to enjoy their natural rights. The government had no authority to invade or to usurp the natural rights of any citizen since any such action would be contrary to the purpose for which it was formed. The obvious, indeed necessary, corollary to this was that if the government attempted to extend its sphere of activity beyond the bounds prescribed by the terms of the contract, it was liable to be overthrown legitimately.<sup>100</sup>

It was these arguments, most cogently (though not exclusively) articulated by John Locke, which the English radicals of the late eighteenth century reiterated in their pamphlets. Their restatement of these principles was in many ways imperfect and less attentive to theoretical detail than the original had been, but what they lacked in logic they made up for in passion. It was these ideas, too, which were transmitted and absorbed almost wholesale in the American colonies and which formed the rationale of colonial resistance during the war of independence, and a blueprint for institutional

reconstruction after it. The Declaration of Independence, America's most revered political document, embodied Lockean precepts in their pristine purity, and nor was it an isolated expression. Jefferson himself confessed that the Declaration was not intended to posit original principles, but to be "an expression of the American mind."<sup>101</sup> In American polemical tracts of the revolutionary period the theme of natural rights is repeated endlessly: James Otis paraphrased the whole of Locke's Two Treatises in his Vindication of the Conduct of the House of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay in 1762;<sup>102</sup> precisely a decade later, the Boston Committee of Correspondence, under the guiding hand of Sam Adams, echoed Lockean principles in a litany of natural rights.<sup>103</sup>

The colonists' appeal to natural rights was in practice, if not strictly in theory, an appeal for the preservation of their rights as British subjects. Their admiration of the English Constitution remained undiminished even after the conflict with the mother-country had ended, yet they deplored the corruption and rottenness which had infiltrated and thus perverted it. There was a very real sense in which the colonists believed that they were preserving the true, unpolluted essence of the English Constitution and enshrining it in a new environment. "They sincerely believed", Gordon S. Wood has written, "that they were not creating new rights or new principles prescribed only by what ought to be, but saw themselves claiming 'only to keep their old privileges', the traditional rights and principles of all Englishmen, sanctioned by what they thought had always been."<sup>104</sup> But if natural rights theory proved a useful and adaptable rhetorical tool for dissolving



the political bands which had connected America to Britain, the depth of American commitment to the theory remained to be seen in the construction of a new set of institutions to replace the old.

The task of reconstituting the governmental structure of the colonies after the conclusion of the war called for quite different skills than those needed for tearing down the old. It was during this period of constitution-forming that Enlightenment concepts long discussed in Europe and America became built into the public philosophy of the community. Universal disgust at the decadence of the British and French Courts smoothed the way for the American transition towards republicanism. But for Americans, republicanism did not simply mean a particular way of organising the government; it conjured up a completely new ethos, a new way of looking at the purpose and function of social institutions. It connoted, too, the traditional public virtues - of patriotism, of moral rectitude, of lofty disinterestedness - which the constitutionalists of ancient antiquity had cherished. Thomas Paine expressed the sentiment well when he said: "Our style and manner of thinking have undergone a revolution more extraordinary than the political revolution of the country. We see with other eyes; we hear with other ears; and think with other thoughts, than those we formerly used."<sup>105</sup> Looking at government with other eyes, Americans saw its purpose as being the public good - that is, the good of its citizens not its rulers. How best to secure the public good became the preeminent political question of the age.<sup>106</sup>

Certain basic assumptions accompanied this new style

In the first place, for the public good to be guaranteed, a settled legal structure which acted as the repository of the rights and duties of the citizens had to be plainly visible, to which all could appeal for redress. Closely related to this, and indispensable to its realisation, was the notion that the arbitrary power of government ought to be kept within severely prescribed bounds by means of a constitution. Fundamental to both these beliefs was the idea that the law and the constitution should be the genuine expressions of the popular will, and to accommodate this American political theorists revived the Lockean notion of the social contract. When David Hume had attacked the social contract as being "fallacious and sophistical" he had not reckoned with the experience of the American Puritan Fathers. The "Holy Commonwealth" which they had formed was based on the covenant theology of the Old Testament and bore a remarkable resemblance to the later Lockean version.<sup>107</sup> The essence of both was voluntarism: the creation of government and society was the result of the consent of the individuals involved, freely given. In some of the newly-formed states, Pennsylvannia notably, arguments were tediously expatiated as to the number of contracts which were necessary to establish society and its institutions. Did the social contract bring into being both the society and the government simultaneously or were two separate contracts necessary for the purpose, the one between the dissociated individuals of the state of nature and the other between the newly-constituted citizens and the government? These questions, and ones like them, formed much of the agenda of debate during the constitution-forming period.<sup>108</sup>



It was in discussions on the nature of government itself that Enlightenment ideas were particularly pronounced. Government, like dress, maintained Paine in his immensely popular Commonsense, was the badge of lost innocence, and it was in the nature of man that Americans looked to find both the purpose and the form of government. Opinion on this supremely important point was virtually unanimous: man was a fallen creature, a selfish animal who was more likely to follow his passions than his reason. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin, the doyen of American philosophes, agreed wholeheartedly with David Hume that reason was the servant of the passions, enabling man to follow more efficiently his selfish whims.<sup>109</sup> This view of human nature, prevalent among American and Scottish philosophes, would have seemed curious to their French counterparts who generally believed that man was essentially a moral and virtuous being who had been corrupted by imperfect social institutions. The mercurial optimism of the French Enlightenment lay in the belief that if defective institutions were swept away, underneath would be revealed a Rousseauian Noble Savage whose natural goodness might be nurtured by a proper education. The writers of the American Enlightenment, however, took their conception of man from Calvinist theology and found him to be permanently infected with pride and sin; their solution was quite the opposite of the French, for they did not wish to abolish social institutions, but to realign them so that they conformed to nature. American writers, like John Adams, were not overly optimistic about man's nature, but they did believe with a proper understanding they could construct institutions which would minimise the harmful effects

of man's natural baseness. The awareness of this fact coloured most of their discussions of government and led them to devise a fragmented system of politics in which self-centred elements were counterpoised against one another. Since government was unavoidably operated by men who were by nature selfish and self-seeking, and since the collective power of the state was at the disposal of the government, it was of first importance that all opportunities for abuse of that power were denied. The elaborate system of checks and balances and the separation of powers was intended to accomplish precisely this purpose by diffusing power amongst the various branches of government.

The Constitution of the United States drawn up in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 was both a masterpiece of practical politics and an experiment in the divine science of government. It represented the belief that the human mind was sufficiently advanced as to be able to construct a set of social institutions which could embody moral precepts, but which at the same time was consonant with observation and experience. Reason combined with experience, not opposed to it, was the Founding Fathers' guideline: they scoured history to find clues as to how governments should be constructed.<sup>110</sup> But if the distinction between rationalism and empiricism is insisted upon, at bottom the Founding Father's political system rested on moral foundations, on certain self-evident principles which ultimately required no empirical validation, simply because they were self-evident. Human liberty, the most emotive of these, they attempted to give practical expression to within the fabric of government itself, though this was not without its difficulties. The Declaration of



Independence had proclaimed that "all men are created equal", though faced with the exigencies of the revolutionary situation few of the Founding Fathers could go so far as to extend liberty to slaves. Indeed, the Americans' effusive professions of their attachment to the cause of liberty made the subsequent discrepancy over slavery doubly embarrassing. Nevertheless, what was achieved by the Founding Fathers was a remarkable reconstruction of governmental institutions and provided an unparalleled example of the Enlightenment-in-practice.<sup>111</sup>

None of this could have been accomplished, however, had not Americans grasped fully the distinctive scientific world-view which dominated European mental habits since the days of Newton. The understandable concentration on the political aspect of the American Revolution has often overshadowed the fact that behind the polemical argument lay a deeply held scientific attitude which gave revolutionary thought patterns a degree of cohesiveness. The most eminent historian of American science, Brooke Hindle, has written that "Science was so central to the thought of the Enlightenment and it lay so directly behind the Revolutionary argument, that the men who made the American Revolution were thoroughly committed to the pursuit of science."<sup>112</sup> Scientific inquiry flourished in late eighteenth century America, and formed the basis of the American optimism in progress. The Puritans, we noted earlier, had not shown the general mistrust of science which had characterised religious groupings in the Old World, but at the same time their scientific speculations took place within the context of a strong biblical faith. Their descend-

ants, however, less shackled to theology, were thus released to probe deeper into the mysteries of nature. Philadelphia fittingly became the scientific centre of the American colonies during the late eighteenth century when Benjamin Franklin founded the American Philosophical Society there in 1769, though it was in Boston and in Cambridge that the most important scientific discoveries were achieved.<sup>113</sup> In medicine, in experimental philosophy (physics) and in the arts, Philadelphia attracted men of unusual talent and penetrating intellect - men like David Rittenhouse, the astronomer and Benjamin Rush, professor of chemistry at newly created College of Philadelphia. Philadelphia, too, attracted men of the European Enlightenment, notably Joseph Priestly and Tom Paine. While the city could not rival London or Paris (or even Edinburgh) as a cultural centre, it did at least set the tone of the American Enlightenment.<sup>114</sup>

The American obsession with science took to extremes the French preoccupation of acquiring "real and useful knowledge".<sup>115</sup> Certainly, the European Enlightenment perceived the endless possibilities of increasing the general happiness of mankind through scientific discovery, but essentially their enchantment lay with the application of scientific techniques to more ethereal branches of knowledge. American needs were, however, more basic; the realisation of the vast, unexploited natural resources she possessed prompted Americans to explore the possibilities of harnessing those resources for the benefit of all the people. American ideas of progress, especially in the nineteenth century, therefore acquired an unmistakably materialistic stamp, which contrasted with European notions



of the eventual perfectability of man. Americans of the nineteenth century, including Calhoun, were fond of looking towards the moral improvement of mankind, but it was clear that they expected moral progress to be dependent, if it could be accomplished at all, on material progress.

#### (d) Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to outline the essential elements of the Enlightenment style which came to fruition in eighteenth century Europe and America. The description has necessarily been a composite one, for to have explored all the ramifications of the many complex strands which constituted the Enlightenment would have required the writing of several dissertations. What is essential to grasp is that the Enlightenment did not consist of a single unified and cohesive doctrine, but of a set of attitudes through which all forms of knowledge were perceived and understood. The key was, of course, the attitude towards epistemology itself. Ernst Cassirer has rightly identified the universal enchantment with science as the distinctive feature of Enlightenment thinking which radiated outwards to the realm of politics, ethics and religion. Systematic observation of Nature and the promulgation of explanatory laws was considered the most certain form of knowledge which ought, as far as possible, to be imitated in

the sphere of moral philosophy. If moral conduct could be brought into alignment with the structure of Nature, there was to be found the true purpose of life.

In religion, the Enlightenment style implied a shift away from the mystical and mysterious orthodoxy of the Middle Ages. The image of God as a personal Sovereign who ruled the universe was replaced by the image of an impersonal prime mover, whose primary manifestation was in the fixed laws of Nature. A cold, analytical deism took the place of a full-blooded and wrathful theism. In Europe, the spectrum of religious thinking was wider than in America, where, as de Tocqueville noted, the Christian faith held a dominant sway;<sup>116</sup> few American philosophes could ever go as far in their rejection of God as did La Mettrie or d'Holbach in France. In America, the demand for a more rational approach to religion took the form of Unitarianism, where the alleged incomprehensibility of the doctrine of the Trinity was more satisfactorily resolved.

In politics, the Enlightenment style implied liberalism, the freedom of man from the encumbrances of imperfect social institutions. Organisational structures which had developed incrementally over centuries, buttressed by superstition and authority, were to be swept away to be replaced by more rational ones which supposedly conformed to Nature.<sup>117</sup> But the political theory of the Enlightenment could not do without relying on moral postulates entirely: liberty was fundamental to their scheme of things, without which nothing valuable could be accomplished. Unless men were free to enjoy the benefits bestowed by Nature, those benefits would count for nought. So, in its political thought the Enlightenment negotiated an uneasy



alliance between certain preconceived moral values and a supposedly value-free method of inquiry. The tensions inherent in such a position account for most of the inconsistencies in Enlightenment thinking.

These themes were held together by a feeling of optimism about the future, a feeling that man had reached a new stage in his development from which he could strike out towards perfectability. In America, the sense of progress was defined in the practical exploitation of the natural resources of the continent, while Europe continued to expect progress in the nature of man itself.

These ideas percolated through to America throughout the course of the eighteenth century and served to shape the American mind, so much so that when the inconsistency between theory and practice exploded over the issue of slavery in the succeeding century, its defenders were unable to emancipate themselves from the thought patterns of the Enlightenment. In the following chapters, we shall be examining the Enlightenment content of Calhoun's Disquisition on Government: we shall look at his method of reasoning and his concept of Natural Law, his attitude towards progress, power and liberty and his devotion to a complex form of constitutionalism. In all these areas, Calhoun owes a debt to the Enlightenment, though on the fundamental question of political values, he turns away from the philosophes and stands as a reactionary.

Chapter Four: Philosophical Method in the Disquisition:  
The Reinterpretation of Natural Law

At the beginning of the previous chapter, I outlined the central thesis of this dissertation, namely that for a proper understanding of Calhoun's political theory, as opposed to his constitutional theory, our attention ought to focus on his brief preliminary text, the Disquisition on Government. I have further argued that the ideas contained in the Disquisition are most fruitfully evaluated within the framework of the "Reactionary Enlightenment", an artificial and paradoxical category suggested by Louis Hartz, which is designed to emphasise and explain the apparent inconsistencies within Calhoun's theory of government. The essence of the paradox lies in the attempt to fashion a political theory which utilises the intellectual equipment most readily associated with the style of the Enlightenment, but which incorporates, too, an implicit defence of slavery. For the Hartz thesis to remain a useful explanatory category of Calhoun's political thought, both elements must be shown to be present in the Disquisition. The main components of the Enlightenment style, both in its European and American manifestations, were identified briefly in the previous chapter and were seen to consist in a devotion to the method of scientific empiricism in politics, religion and ethics, a belief in the capacity of the human mind to construct social institutions which were consonant with Nature, and a faith in the ultimate perfectability of man. Using these criteria, I want to examine in this, and in succeeding chapters, the validity of the "React-



ionary Enlightenment" as an explanatory concept and to analyse how applicable it is to Calhoun's Disquisition.

In this chapter and the next, the two specific areas which we shall be dealing with are Calhoun's philosophical method and his religious thought. The importance of philosophical method was underlined in our discussion of the Enlightenment which was distinguished from earlier modes of thought chiefly by its eager acceptance of the epistemological assumptions of seventeenth century science. The development of scientific empiricism offered a striking challenge to the accepted canons of a priori reasoning and resulted, in Bertrand Russell's words, in "One of the great historic controversies in philosophy".<sup>1</sup> Yet the empirical basis of the Enlightenment remains a complex and controversial issue, for, at least until 1750, enlightened political values continued to be defined in terms of the ancient conception of Natural Law, a universal moral order which was knowable by reason and which could not, a fortiori, be demonstrated by empirical observation.<sup>2</sup> It was not until the arrival on the scene of utilitarian concepts that the political theory of the Enlightenment could legitimately claim to be scientific.<sup>3</sup> But if Natural Law, based on self-evident (and therefore a priori) principles was one of the last intellectual conventions to be abandoned by the Enlightenment, it in no way inhibited the style of rigorous cross-examination which was so much a feature of the scientific method. Ultimately, it was only a question of time before the Enlightenment could bring its actual method into line with its self-professed ideal of "scientific" knowledge of man and

society. Philosophical method is therefore a crucial distinguishing mark between those frames of thought which may properly be called "enlightened" and those which may not. Understanding Calhoun's method of reasoning in the Disquisition is an indispensable first step in determining the applicability of the "Reactionary Enlightenment" to his political thought.

Although Calhoun's religious thought is a less obviously important area of study, it bears examination for two reasons. In the first place, where political obligation is conceived as moral obligation, as it was in all prescriptive political theories to a greater or lesser extent until the second half of the Enlightenment, sanction for the moral order prescribed was thought to be ultimately derived from God. This is certainly true of all Natural Law theorists, including Locke, who held that the rights and duties of individuals rested on a law which was higher than human law, and which emanated from God.<sup>4</sup> Even during the eighteenth century, when most avenues of thought became increasingly secular, writers were reluctant to deny absolutely God's role as the fountain of the moral law of the universe; but He was no longer thought of as being a personal God who intervened in the affairs of men to accomplish His divine purpose nor as a Divine Legislator who inscribed the moral law on blocks of stone. Rather, His will was consulted by recourse to Nature which was conceived of as the divine ordering of all created existence. Thus, it was possible for Thomas Jefferson to appeal to "Nature and Nature's God" as justification for the political separation of America from Britain in 1776.



Furthermore, he was able to argue that the rights to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness" were moral laws precisely because they had been endowed on men by their Creator.<sup>5</sup>

Enlightened religious thought, then, as it applied to politics and other branches of knowledge, tended to take the form of deism. God was retained in the scheme of things, but only, in Viscount Bolinbroke's phrase, as "the first efficient cause".<sup>6</sup> All mystery was banished from the scene in an attempt to make religious faith conform to the precepts of reason, and, incidentally, to remove it from the narrow confines of the various sects. Locke, it is true, along with other moderate British deists, attempted to show in The Reasonableness of Christianity (1695) that the Scriptures contained nothing which was incompatible with the dictates of human reason, but the prevailing tendency in Enlightened circles on both sides of the Atlantic was to regard the Bible as being of secondary importance to Nature as the true source of God's law. The eloquent American deist Ethan Allan summed up this position: "As far as we understand nature, we are become acquainted with the character of God; for the knowledge of nature is the revelation of God."<sup>7</sup>

Religious ideas, especially insofar as they touch upon politics in the form of Natural or Divine Law, are therefore a further mark of distinction between enlightened and other categories of thought. By comparing Calhoun's general religious attitude and his explicit statements on Natural Law in the Disquisition with the tenets of Enlightenment deism, we ought to be able to determine the extent to which his religious thought

conforms to the spirit of the Enlightenment. What makes this exercise a particularly fruitful one is the further comparison of Calhoun's position with the attitudes of the Southern proslavery school. It will be argued that Calhoun's religious views stand in marked contrast to the views of those who undertook to defend slavery by insisting on a literal reading of Scripture, and that they give the appearance of being fully consonant with the Enlightenment attitude. Nevertheless, while the components of his religious thought might be significantly similar to the deism of the Enlightenment, the use to which he puts the fully-assembled ideas in the Disquisition is decidedly un-Enlightened. So far from erecting a set of moral laws, derived directly from God for the guidance of human actions, Calhoun postulates a form of Natural Law which gives divine sanction for the existing social order. There is an interesting irony involved here: Calhoun reaches a conclusion which the writers of the Enlightenment ought to have reached themselves had they been true to their ideal of investigating history and society scientifically. If they had conceived Natural Law (as their empirical temper should have told them to) not as a set of moral rules derived a priori, but as a collection of inductively held hypotheses drawn from the experience of history, scientifically-speaking, they ought to have concluded, along with Alexander Pope, that "Whatever is, is right".<sup>8</sup> Of course, to have done so would have robbed the Enlightenment of one of its most distinctive characteristics; but again, it is not the only movement in ideas which is known chiefly for its inconsistencies. In a curious way, then, Calhoun uses the Enlightenment against itself: he takes its method of scientific



investigation and inductively builds up a framework of Natural Law which contains its own moral imperative - that is, whatever is, is right. In this sense, Calhoun reminds us not so much of the classic Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, but more of the Social Darwinists of the late nineteenth century. Calhoun, like William Graham Sumner, attempts to convert description of the status quo into prescription so that his interpretation of Natural Law is actually a sanction for existing social coercions.<sup>9</sup>

There exists, therefore, an intimate and complex relation between Calhoun's philosophical method and his religious thought which we shall attempt to unravel in this chapter and the next. One caveat ought to be issued at the outset, however. By using the formal terms "philosophical method" and "religious thought", there is the danger of investing them, as they apply to Calhoun, with a greater sense of systematisation than would seem to warrant from the text itself. There is little evidence, for example, that Calhoun ever considered the question of method in a philosophical sense, as did Hobbes, Locke and Hume.<sup>10</sup> Calhoun made no explicit attempt to evolve a prior theory of knowledge on which to build his political theory, and this as much as anything else distinguishes him as a political theorist rather than as a political philosopher. Nevertheless, this in no way implies that penetrating the Disquisition to find his method of reasoning is a futile or irrelevant exercise; simply because Calhoun felt no need to articulate his epistemological assumptions does not mean to say that he was devoid of them, but, on the contrary, that they were so well-established that

they needed no restatement.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, it is often in these sub-conscious assumptions that we learn the extent to which thinkers are indebted to the intellectual traditions they operate within.

The fundamental conception on which Americans based the theoretical justification of their separation from Great Britain in the 1770s was the idea of Natural Law, and no more eloquent statement of the American version of the doctrine can be found than in the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. 12

The central elements of the American interpretation of Natural Law theory are readily apparent in the above passage: the inviolability of certain individual human rights, political obligation founded on consent, and an ultimate justification of resistance to tyrannical government. None of these statements of political principle were startlingly original, nor were they intended to be; Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration, maintained that the document was designed "to be an expression of the American mind", an exposition of "the harmonizing sentiments of the day".<sup>13</sup> Yet what is peculiar about these "sentiments" is that they were erupting into the



forefront of American political theory in a more dramatic way than ever before at precisely the time they were passing out of fashion in Europe.

The notion of Natural Law was an idea which the writers of the Enlightenment in Europe inherited from classical and medieval times.<sup>14</sup> Throughout the course of its history subtle changes had occurred in its meaning which makes it one of the most difficult of political concepts to define. Nevertheless, certain constant features may be identified. In general, Natural Law was thought to be a transcendent, moral standard imposed on the universe by its Creator, to which all moral beings ought to conform. The Law of Nature, whether it derived from God or simply from the nature of things, was objective in the sense that it existed independently of human will and could therefore not be altered by human agency. Moreover, the law's application was universal, irrespective of time or place or the positive, man-made law which obtained in different localities. It was this metaphysical principle which informed the political and ethical cosmology of writers from the time of Cicero to the Enlightenment. But a crucial question remained: if Natural Law did, in fact, exist, in what ways was it discoverable to man? In his discourse on the Laws, Cicero had maintained that man was equipped to perceive the Law of Nature by means of a special faculty - "right reason" - which enabled him to act in conformity with the universal principles of justice prescribed by Natural Law. On at least two occasions, Cicero held that this faculty applied to all men without regard to intellectual capacity or status, thereby implying that there existed a moral equality amongst men.<sup>15</sup> This conclusion, which

contrasted sharply with Aristotle, was carried over into the later Middle Ages by Grotius and Pufendorf. Grotius's definition of Natural Law, in De Jure Belli ac Pacis (1625), was a re-echo of Cicero: it was, he wrote, "the dictate of right reason, indicating that any act, from its agreement or disagreement with the rational nature, has in it a moral turpitude or a moral necessity."<sup>16</sup> For Grotius, the principles of Natural Law were ultimately moral axioms, analagous to the propositions of mathematics, from which other principles could be derived, but which themselves needed no proof simply because they were held a priori. This is clearly stated in the Prolegomena: "In the first place, it was my object to refer the truth of the things which belong to Natural Law to some notions, so certain, that no one can deny them, without doing violence to his own nature."<sup>17</sup> Grotius' appeal to Right Reason and self-evidence in the discovery of Natural Law is important because it formed the agenda of epistemological discussion to which Locke contributed so much, later in the century.

The scientific advances of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries drew attention to another sense in which Natural Law was used, and in the process clarified the method employed for discovering it. In this second sense, Natural Law was again thought of as a universal standard, but one which goverened the movements of objects in the physical, as opposed to the moral, world. (It would be misleading to imply that Natural Law, as a physical cosmology, existed independently of the moral, for the essential fruitfulness of the concept derived from its fundamental assumption of the unity of the cosmos.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the identification of regularities in the physical



world - the movement of planets, the succession of seasons - led thinkers to conclude that there existed an objective "law" governing the universe which applied to all spheres of existence, the moral as much as the physical.<sup>19</sup> This assumption, present in early Greek thought, betokened (as George Sabine has put it) "the search for permanence amid change and for unity amid the manifold."<sup>20</sup> ) The scientific discoveries of Kepler, Galileo and Newton highlighted a cleavage between the two senses in which Natural Law was used, but a cleavage which was methodological rather than cosmological. Newton's great scientific synthesis, the Principia Mathematica, continued to lend support to the notion of an all-embracing Law of Nature, but as far as scientific inquiry was concerned the method used to discover it was observation and experiment, rather than pure reason.<sup>21</sup> Unlike moral precepts, which were prescriptive and self-evident, scientific hypotheses had to contend with the raw data of observed experience; instead of proceeding from certain logical, a priori principles to deduce particular instances of fact, the scientific method inverted the procedure so that its hypotheses were induced by extracting the constant principle involved from all the observed instances of the behaviour of the object or objects under study. This method - scientific empiricism or induction -, by moving from the isolated "facts" of observed experience towards abstraction, provided a fundamental connection between reality and man's way of knowing it, which had been absent in the purely deductive systems of ancient and medieval philosophers. Of course, scientific "truth" arrived at by

induction could never claim the same status of certainty as logical proofs, for the possibility always exists that the future behaviour of an object might not conform to the hypothesis postulated to explain it, in which case the hypothesis itself is nullified, or at least subject to modification.<sup>22</sup>

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, then, two senses in which Natural Law was conceived may be distinguished, each employing different methods of reasoning and directed towards different objects. Natural Law in the sense of being a moral standard to which human beings aspire, was knowable by the use of reason, and grasped intuitively. In its second sense, Natural Law was still considered to be a universal standard but one which regulated the physical behaviour of objects. The crucial difference between the two was method: "scientific" Natural Law, so to speak, proceeded along the lines of observation and experiment to frame inductive "laws" of behaviour which described, rather than prescribed, events in the physical world. Moral theory could never be fully accommodated to this method precisely because it was not prescriptive, because it dealt with normative statements of value and not details of known fact. Nevertheless, the very freshness of the scientific approach, coming after centuries of arid scholasticism and closed deductive systems, breathed new life into all branches of philosophical inquiry. This was accomplished largely by the refinement of a new empirical epistemology and the man who accomplished it was John Locke.

Locke's theory of knowledge was presented in his Essay



Concerning Human Understanding, published at the end of 1689, and became the source-book of the empirical method for most of the eighteenth century, or at least until David Hume published his Treatise of Human Nature in 1739-40. Locke's purpose in writing the Essay was to analyse the implications of the scientific method and to clarify the psychological process involved in knowing anything from observation and experience. The fundamental premise of the Essay, and of all Locke's subsequent philosophical writings, stated at the opening of Book II, is that the human mind derives its ideas from sensation and reflection, that it is from experience "that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself."<sup>23</sup> Locke was concerned with denying the existence of what were termed "innate principles", that is ideas which are allegedly "stamped" on the human mind by God at birth; such a concept, though formulated by philosophy's great anti-authoritarian Descartes, implied that there existed a category of knowledge which could not be questioned.<sup>24</sup> But at the same time, Locke was careful to distinguish between innate principles and self-evident ideas. His definition of self-evident principles was similar to Grotius's "fundamental conceptions which are beyond question so that no one can deny them without doing violence to himself"; they were, Locke maintained,

Such kinds of truth the mind perceives at the first sight of the ideas together by bare intuition, without the intervention of any other idea; and this kind of knowledge is the clearest and most certain that human frailty is capable of. It is on this intuition that depends all the certainty and evidence of all our knowledge; which certainty everyone finds to

be so great that he cannot imagine,  
and therefore not require, a  
greater. 25

These are strange ideas indeed to be coming from a philosopher who is known primarily as an empiricist, for at this juncture Locke is arguing for the existence of a certain kind of knowledge which is a priori, not empirical. But the point must be made that Locke was not essentially opposed to the principle that certain kinds of knowledge could be intuitively or rationally perceived, only that the scope of such knowledge was severely limited. What distinguishes Locke from his continental contemporaries Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, is essentially a shift of emphasis away from pure rationalism towards empiricism. Where Descartes could see the endless possibilities of achieving certain knowledge through the exercise of unaided reason, Locke saw its limitations and sought to redress the balance in favour of a more commonsense empiricism. George Sabine's judgement of Locke, that he "was an empiricist but with a large residue of philosophic rationalism",<sup>26</sup> captures precisely the balance of Locke's thought, and restores to its proper status the rationalistic content of his epistemology.<sup>27</sup> Traditional interpretations of Locke, which have tended to exaggerate his empiricism at the expense of his rationalism, have consequently been unable to find a connection between his theory of knowledge and his moral and political theory.<sup>28</sup> Some have maintained that his use of Natural Law, as providing a moral standard and perceived through the exercise of reason, in his political theory is fundamentally irreconcilable with his epistemology, a criticism which would be true if Locke had denied the



possibility of a priori knowledge.<sup>29</sup> But he does not; his denial of innate ideas does not amount to the same thing as a denial of self-evident propositions, which he explicitly accepts.<sup>30</sup> Once this is grasped the irreconcilability of his epistemology with his political theory is removed.

Locke's understanding of Natural Law is, however, sufficiently different from traditional interpretations of the doctrine that it bears closer examination, particularly in the light of subsequent American usage. In Locke, Natural Law is conceived as the source of a corpus of rights which each individual born into the world holds by virtue of his humanity. The equality of these rights is derived directly from God's sovereignty over the world He created and the individuals He created to populate it; this is made clear at the beginning of the Second Treatise where Locke says that there is "nothing more evident, than that Creatures of the same species and rank promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another without Subordination or Subjection...."<sup>31</sup> Locke does not, of course, mean to imply that all individuals are equal in capacity or material status, but that their moral standing before God makes them equal in rights, and no one but God can deprive an individual of his rights. But how does it come about that men recognise their own and others' moral equality? Locke answers that it is through the Law of Nature, which is the Law of Reason.<sup>32</sup> Reason is the peculiar gift of God to man which separates him from other animals;<sup>33</sup> moreover, in the state of nature, where individuals originally existed in the absence of civil

society, the Law of Reason was the only guide and the only limitation on human action. When a man offends against the Law of Nature by seeking to deprive another individual of his God-given rights, he is deemed to have "quitted Reason, which God hath given to be the Rule betwixt Man and Man"<sup>34</sup> and "renders himself liable to be destroyed by the injur'd person and the rest of mankind, that will joyn with him in the execution of Justice...."<sup>35</sup>

Amongst the rights which Locke regarded as Natural (that is, rights pertaining to individuals which existed independently of civil association and which were a direct consequence of God's endowment) were the rights to life, liberty and estate, which collectively he calls Property.<sup>36</sup> In the state of nature all men are in "a State of perfect Freedom to order their Actions, and dispose of their Possessions, and Persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the Law of Nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the Will of any other Man."<sup>37</sup> The problem was that in the state of nature mens' rights were precarious indeed, for the absence of an enforcing agent afforded opportunities for the Law of Nature to be broken with virtual impunity. It is true that Locke regarded the "injur'd person and the rest of mankind" as having a right to punish the offender "to that degree, and with so much Severity as will suffice to make it an ill bargain to the Offender, give him cause to repent, and terrifie others from doing the like",<sup>38</sup> but he also recognised that the interests of justice might not be best served if the victim, through an excess of zeal or a desire for revenge, were to exact a harsher penalty than the



original offence warranted. All in all, justice in the state of nature, whether for the victim or the offender, seemed hard to come by.

It is for precisely these reasons that men find it convenient to organise themselves into civil communities, and the device by which they accomplish it is the social contract. Having shown that all men are "by Nature, all free, equal and independent",<sup>39</sup> Locke concludes that no individual can be forced into society without giving his freely-arrived at consent. "The only way whereby any one divests himself of his Natural Liberty, and puts on the bonds of Civil Society is by agreeing with other Men to joyn and unite into a Community, for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living one amongst another...."<sup>40</sup> What is involved in this agreement is that each individual voluntarily consents to surrender a portion of the natural powers he held in the state of nature, to be placed at the collective disposal of the community at large. All this, of course, does not involve the renunciation of any Natural Rights because, in the first place, although they are inherent in each individual, properly speaking they belong not to the individual in whom they inhere, but to God whose original creation they were; and secondly, the whole purpose of instituting society is in order to protect the individual in the enjoyment of his Natural Rights - so, even if individual Natural Rights were alienable, which Locke denies, to surrender them on entering society would be contrary to the purpose of its formation. It followed from this that the agent of the collective community - the government - was in no legitimate position to abrogate the rights

of any of the citizens, and should it attempt to do so, it was liable to be justly overthrown.

These were the sentiments that Jefferson and his revolutionary contemporaries drew on in an effort to justify American actions to a candid world. The whole emphasis of the Declaration of Independence was clearly centred on the protection of Natural Rights from capricious and arbitrary government, a charge which was levelled at George III in a litany of indictments. Yet if one surveys the scene of European enlightened political theory at this period, one finds this Lockean conception of Natural Law, based on self-evident propositions, coming under severe attack from Utilitarians and others precisely because of its non-empirical character. David Hume's Treatise of Human Nature, for example, sought to clarify the senses in which the concept of reason was used in Natural Law theory, and concluded that reason itself prescribed no principles of justice or right which were binding on men. In this sense, Reason had been confused with "propensity", a human inclination towards a particular course of action which was founded on the will and the passions. Reason was itself "perfectly inert" and could "never be the source of so active a principle as conscience or a sense of morals."<sup>41</sup> From this Hume concluded in a famous phrase that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."<sup>42</sup> Hume's assault on reason as an active, controlling principle in human motivation struck systematically at the heart of traditional Natural Law philosophy in all its political manifestations and from which, in Europe at least, it never really



recovered. In France, although Hume's conclusions were not wholly accepted, it gave added impetus to the nascent ideas of utilitarianism which continued into the nineteenth century.<sup>43</sup>

Given this situation in European political theory, how are we to account for the American attachment to a theory of Natural Rights which was becoming obsolete elsewhere? One reason is suggested by purely physical factors: the sources which the French utilitarians were drawing on, particularly Hume's social philosophy, were not generally available in America in the 1770s and 1780s. Hume's History of England and his Essays, it is true, were available, but not the important Treatise of Human Nature. It is notable that Jefferson's main contact with Hume's work was through the History of England, which he admired except for its Tory bias.<sup>44</sup> This reason, however, cannot be pushed too far for even though the main statements of Hume's philosophy were not available in America, the writings of other sentimentalist philosophers were.<sup>45</sup> A second, and more interesting reason for the cultural time lag has been suggested by Donald Meyer. Meyer has maintained that the attraction of Natural Rights for Americans lay in the realm of moral rhetoric, that is, its ideas served as "elaborate metaphors" to explain the moral relation between individuals and the state.<sup>46</sup> For a people about to undertake the drastic step of rebellion, some form of psychological reassurance that their course was a right one was necessary; such reassurance could only succeed if the justification for revolt were grounded on firm, unassailable, self-evident principles. Empirical generalisation could never fully accomplish this kind of function simply because it could not

aspire to the same degree of certainty as moral axioms: its evidence, as Hume ironically pointed out, could always be countered by opposing evidence.<sup>47</sup> Where the empirical method could come into its own was in the reconstruction of social institutions, drawing on history and experience, but as an instrument in a moral crusade it was weak and unappealing, almost insignificant alongside the cosmic certainty of moral dicta.

Natural Rights, then, supplied the indispensable moral justification of the American Revolution, but in doing so it fixed the boundaries of American political theory for generations. For by associating Natural Rights theory with so cataclysmic and meaningful an event as the Revolution, and by writing its fundamental propositions into their most revered political document, Americans were recording in a moment of time the eternal principles they professed to live by. To a later generation, the Declaration of Independence stood both as a reminder of those original principles and as an indictment of the institution of slavery; the intellectual veneration of the Declaration may be accredited one of the reasons for the rise of the anti-slavery crusade which dominated politics in the early part of the nineteenth century.

Against this conception of Natural Law - as a moral prescription entailing certain fundamental individual rights - Calhoun stands as a rigorous and systematic opponent. Few points emerge with greater clarity from the Disquisition on Government than Calhoun's utter rejection of the theory of Natural Rights and the accompanying intellectual apparatus of social contract theory. The reason for this rejection,



namely the incompatibility of combining the concept of Natural Rights with the existence of slavery, will be discussed in greater detail in a later chapter,\* but what is of particular interest here is the grounds on which Calhoun bases his refutation and the implications it has for his philosophical method. For Calhoun's attack on Natural Rights is accomplished in the best empiricist style, in much the same manner as Hume's critique of Locke was.<sup>48</sup>

In an admitted digression in the middle of the Disquisition, Calhoun considers the "prevalent opinion that all men are born free and equal" and concludes that "nothing can be more unfounded and false."<sup>49</sup> The misconception, he maintains, is founded on an equally erroneous notion that there existed a state of nature, "a state of individuality supposed to have existed prior to the social and political state, and in which men lived apart and independent of each other." "But such a state", he continues, "is purely hypothetical.... Instead of being the natural state of man, it is, of all conceivable states, the most opposed to his nature--most repugnant to his feelings and most incompatible with his wants."<sup>50</sup> Calhoun's grounds for rejecting the state of nature are important because they demonstrate the extent to which he utilises the empirical method of reasoning, for he bases his whole attack on a denial that the state of nature ever existed as a matter of fact. Indeed, more than this, he is prepared to accept the "natural" freedom and equality of men if it could be shown that such a presocial state of nature had existed as an historical reality: "If such a state ever did exist, all men would have been, indeed, free and equal in it; that is, free

\* See chapter six below

to do as they pleased and exempt from the authority and control of others...."<sup>51</sup> But Calhoun is confident that "universal observation" would show no such state to have ever existed.<sup>52</sup>

Calhoun's attack on the Lockean state of nature is along the same lines as Hume's, though Calhoun was more relentless in pushing his criticism to its logical conclusion. Hume had maintained that no empirical evidence could be found to support the contention that a state of nature had existed and that consequently it was to be regarded as a "<sup>philosophical</sup> mere fiction."<sup>53</sup> But at the same time, Hume was prepared to tolerate the libertarian implications of the theories of the social contract writers, largely because their conclusions coincided with his own concept of political obligation and right. Hume, in fact, deals remarkably gently with the social contract theorists, "Those political writers", as he calls them, who "... intended to establish a principle, which is perfectly just and reasonable; tho' the reasoning, upon which they endeavour'd to establish it, was fallacious and sophistical."<sup>54</sup> What Hume was primarily concerned with was to show that the idea of rights and duties of individuals did not depend upon the actual existence of a presocial state of nature or an original social contract, but that these elements served as a metaphor to describe the moral status of individuals in relation to the state and vice versa. Calhoun's purpose is, however, different; so far from accepting the conclusions of Locke, he is concerned with eliminating entirely any notion of individual rights existing independently of society, for to have done so would have meant admitting that men held



rights within their own persons, by virtue of their status as the special creation of God, in which case he could not have escaped the conclusion that black slaves, being men (however inferior), were entitled to such rights.<sup>55</sup> In an effort to avoid this conclusion, Calhoun strikes at the most obviously weak element of social contract theory, the state of nature, attacking it on empirical grounds. Hume's mild rebuke of Locke for his non-empirical speculation in this regard, becomes in Calhoun a violent counter-assertion and the means of attacking the political value-system which the apparatus was designed to defend.

What is entailed in Calhoun's denial of the existence of the state of nature does not involve an obscure philosophical nicety, but a point of fundamental importance in describing the moral relation of individuals to each other and to the society of which they are a part. Whether Locke conceived the state of nature as a moral fiction or as an historical fact (and there are good grounds for believing the latter to be true<sup>56</sup>), the effect was the same: it emphasised that individuals possessed rights prior to the formation of society, that they retained those rights once they had consented to join it, and that the purpose of society was to guarantee those rights. By attacking the state of nature, Calhoun was threatening the whole of this intellectual structure: if there were no state of nature, individual rights could not claim to derive from it; nor was consent necessary to become a part of society; but most of all, the community was under no obligation to protect the rights of individuals since, properly speaking,

those rights did not exist apart from society. Whatever rights individuals did hold derived their force and legitimacy from society itself, and could therefore never be "natural" in the Lockean sense. Even liberty, the most highly-prized of Southern rights, was not an inviolable Natural Right: "It is a reward to be earned, not a blessing to be gratuitously lavished on all alike--a reward reserved for the intelligent, the patriotic, the virtuous and the deserving--not a boon to be bestowed on a people too ignorant, degraded and vicious, to be capable of either appreciating or of enjoying it...."<sup>57</sup>

Through his attack on the state of nature Calhoun was therefore attacking the whole conception of Natural Rights and the traditional American interpretation of Natural Law. In June 1848, in a speech to the Senate on the Oregon Bill, he had subjected the natural law propositions of the Declaration of Independence to severe, if pedantic, scrutiny.<sup>58</sup> The idea that "all men are created equal", he maintained, was wholly lacking in truth, for originally - and biblically - only two persons were "created" and all the rest were born into the world. Moreover, it was not men that were born, but children and "While infants they are incapable of freedom, being destitute alike of the capacity of thinking and acting, without which there can be no freedom. Besides, they are necessarily born subject to the authority of their parents, and remain so among all people, savage and civilized, until the development of their intellect and physical capacity enables them to take care of themselves."<sup>59</sup> There is very little in this statement which would have caused Locke to quarrel with Calhoun, except that Calhoun goes on to say that



children, when they become men, acquire "the freedom of which the condition in which they were born permits."<sup>60</sup> To Calhoun, liberty was relative to the individual's station in life, whereas in Locke the equality of the right to liberty was absolute; "Children", maintained Locke, "are not born in this full state of Equality, though they are born to it. Their Parents have a sort of Rule and Jurisdiction over them when they come into the World, and for some time after, but 'tis a temporary one."<sup>61</sup> For Locke, the parental authority over offspring was a duty to be exercised only until they grew to adulthood when then they would claim the full rights of liberty held previously in trust for them.

Calhoun's attack on Natural Rights both in the speech of June 1848 and in the Disquisition are examples of his appeal to observation and experience as opposed to a priori speculation. If his objections appear trivial and superficial, this is an inescapable function of the method he chose to use, for against the grandiloquent statements of moral principle, criticisms based on empirical grounds, one might say on mere matters of fact, almost necessarily seem spurious. Yet it is difficult to see on what other grounds he could have accomplished the demolition of Natural Rights so completely. By denying the existence of the state of nature, both as an historical fact and as a philosophical device, the whole framework of natural rights theory crumbles in a heap. But, of course, this can only be the first step, a clearing away of the ground, prior to erecting a new philosophical structure to replace the old. If Natural Rights as a description of the moral status of the individual before the state is abolished

a whole series of important questions concerning the nature of political obligation is left unanswered and Calhoun must somehow account for these. The way in which he does this is to construct a completely new conception of Natural Law, drawn from a supposedly scientific analysis of human nature, which he then elevates into moral obligation by the introduction of a postulate of divine sanction.

In the opening paragraphs of the Disquisition, Calhoun's reliance on a form of Natural Law which is quite different from the American notion of Natural Rights, is immediately apparent. "In order to have a clear and just conception", he writes, "of the nature and object of government, it is indispensable to understand correctly what that constitution or law of our nature is in which government originates...."<sup>62</sup> The first major assumption of the work, therefore, is that there exists a fundamental law of human nature which governs the actions of all men, and which it is beyond the power of man to alter (for if it were alterable at will, it could not claim the status of a "law" in the scientific sense). To emphasise the constancy of this law of human nature, Calhoun employs a metaphor drawn from the realm of physical science: "Without this [law], it is as impossible to lay any solid foundation for the science of government as it would be to lay one for that of astronomy without a like understanding of that constitution or law of the material world according to which the several bodies composing the solar system mutually act on each other and by which they are kept in their respective spheres."<sup>63</sup> The use of this metaphor, to which Calhoun returned later in the



text, is particularly suggestive because it implied that he intended to search for this law not so much in the realm of abstract speculation as in the sphere of observed and trusted experience.

We have noted earlier in this chapter that the method of understanding the so-called "scientific" version of Natural Law proceeded along the lines of observing the behaviour of material phenomena with a view to extracting the constant principle involved and postulating it as a descriptive "law" or hypothesis. The adaptation of this method to political theory was the peculiar accomplishment of the latter phase of the Enlightenment. This is exactly the method that Calhoun professes to use in his reconstruction of Natural Law. Having assumed that the Law of Nature extends to the area of human motivation, Calhoun appeals to "universal experience" to discover what the constant principle involved in political life is.<sup>64</sup> Two principles, history tells Calhoun, are at work in human nature: man is both a social animal, and, at the same time, a self-interested one. He is not interested in knowing why this should be the case, only that it is so and, consequently, he presents these facets as "incontestable facts" and not as maxims of ethical right. Indeed, in order to avoid violating the scientific spirit of the theory, Calhoun refrains from using the word "selfish" to describe man's self-centred feelings: "I intentionally avoid the expression 'selfish feelings'... because as commonly used, it implies an unusual excess of the individual over the social feelings in the person to whom it is applied and, consequently, something depraved and vicious. My object is to exclude such inference

and to restrict the inquiry exclusively to facts in their bearings on the subject under consideration, viewed as mere phenomena appertaining to our nature...."<sup>65</sup>

From these two propositions of human nature, empirically formulated, Calhoun derives almost the whole of his subsequent theory of government. Yet it is pertinent to inquire just how valid his empirical postulates are, for Calhoun does not bother to present the evidence he presumably must have in order to make them valid. By way of illustration, we may take his first proposition of human nature (namely, that man is a social being) and subject his argument to closer scrutiny. Calhoun assumes "as an incontestable fact that man is so constituted as to be a social being. His inclinations and wants, physical and moral, irresistibly impel him to associate with his kind; and he has, accordingly, never been found, in any age or country, in any state other than the social. In no other, indeed, could he exist, and in no other - were it possible for him to exist - could he attain to a full development of his moral and intellectual faculties...."<sup>66</sup> Now, in the first part of this quotation, Calhoun is making a strictly empirical claim - that man's needs force him to associate with his fellows; but having made that statement, we would expect Calhoun to offer evidence in support of it. Instead, however, we get a second statement, not as evidence validating the first, but on the contrary, relying for its own validity on the truth of the original statement. The fact that man has never been found, historically, in any state other than the social, does not logically preclude the possibility that a presocial state had, in fact, existed



for as Locke showed quite simply and reasonably, "Government is everywhere antecedent to Records."<sup>67</sup> On this point, then, Calhoun's argument is not sufficient to overthrow Locke's, though in fairness, it is difficult to see what kind of argument, other than an anthropological one, could settle the dispute. But what is interesting is that Calhoun moves from this empirical position to maintain that, in effect, the social condition is the one most suited to develop man's "moral and intellectual faculties". This claim has about it all the appearance of a value-judgement, though, of course, it is not expressed in those terms. Having denied that there has ever existed a state of nature, Calhoun is now saying that even if one had existed, it could not have fulfilled the function of encouraging the development of man's faculties, a claim which is entirely non-empirical, though one with which, I suspect, Locke would have agreed.

What is at stake at this stage of the argument is not a scholastic dispute about whether or not an original state of nature ever existed - although Calhoun frames the argument in these terms - but an important point concerning Calhoun's style of discourse, and the values he is attempting to defend. Calhoun is displaying the same tendency which many of the writers of the Enlightenment displayed, of allowing his political values to merge with empirical facts, and in some cases, to substitute for them. He is not simply saying, in this instance, that man is a social animal because he has never been found in any other condition, but he is hinting that this is the "natural" condition of man, and, as such, it is good and proper. Moreover, by inference he is claiming, again

as the Enlightenment writers did, that the best possible way in which to frame social institutions is by making them conform as nearly as possible to the processes of Nature as observed through experience. Edmund Burke, a statesman and political writer whom Calhoun admired intensely, put it well when he wrote that "The science of constructing a commonwealth, or renovating it, or reforming it, is, like every other experimental science not to be taught a priori."<sup>68</sup> Although Burke, unlike Calhoun, accepted the idea that society was an artificial contrivance and not a natural organism, he believed that its institutions should be modelled to accommodate, and in some cases restrain, the "propensities" of human nature. Calhoun is, in some ways, more extreme than Burke; by making society the natural state of man and by maintaining that government is also a natural outgrowth of man's nature, he is shifting the emphasis away from the individual and his rights towards the community as a whole. Thus, as we shall see in a later chapter,\* Calhoun not only falls outside the mainstream American interpretation of Natural Law theory, but also outside the individualist tradition which had dominated western political theory since the Reformation.

Calhoun's commitment to an empirical political theory is not in doubt, even if at times he tends to commit the logical mistake of merging facts with values. He attempts to reinterpret Natural Law in such a way that it becomes knowable not through the exercise of pure reason, but by means of the "reasonable faculty used empirically."<sup>69</sup> Reason, in the Cartesian sense, has no place in Calhoun's political philos-

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\* See Chapter Seven below



ophy, just as it had little place in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Calhoun was nearer to the position of the sentimentalist school of the Scottish Enlightenment than he was to the Cartesians. "Interest", he maintained in a speech to the House of Representatives as a young Congressman in 1812, "has wonderful control over sentiment. Even the more refined and elevated--the moral and religious sentiment--may be considered as ultimately resting on it...."<sup>70</sup> Thus, it was the gratification of desires, a Hobbesian satisfaction of appetites, which motivated men primarily; reason merely enabled them to pursue this end more efficiently.

Calhoun's version of Natural Law is not a "law" in the sense that it prescribes maxims of moral behaviour, but in the sense that it describes what actually exists, and seeks to portray its findings as reliable empirical generalisations. It is, one might say, an attempt to introduce a sense of philosophical realism to the study of political behaviour. Calhoun's fundamental assumptions concerning human nature - and, of course, the prior assumption that human motives can be reduced to a few unchanging principles - are evidence of his empiricist frame of mind, no less than his survey at the end of the Disquisition, of the variety of constitutions which, he maintained, embodied his celebrated principle of the concurrent majority.<sup>71</sup>

Calhoun's reinterpretation of Natural Law as it was expressed in the Declaration of Independence involved no appeal to self-evident truths which entailed certain inprescriptible individual rights; it did not proceed from the

highest plane of abstraction to work itself out in particular instances of fact. Rather, the process was quite the reverse, borrowing for social and political theory, the method of the experimental sciences. For Calhoun, Natural Law was not a closed system in which conclusions were deduced from intuitively held "truths", but a system which built-up its "truths" inductively from the hard facts of observed experience. In this, Calhoun was conforming to the methodological spirit of the Enlightenment, though not, of course, to its political values. But how significant is this conformity? Within the context in which Calhoun was writing, that is, the ideological conflict over slavery, there is evidence to suggest that he was not unusual in adopting an empirical approach. W.S.Jenkins has maintained that a prominent feature of proslavery political thought was its violent reaction against abstract reason as the decisive factor in determining political norms and values. "Observation rather than speculation", he wrote, "became the technique of pro-slavery thinking. The slaveholder became a realist rather than an idealist in politics. History and experience were his guides in government...."<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as the conflict intensified in the 1850s, after Calhoun's death, the Southern revolt against abstraction became more virulent; it reached its zenith in the writings of George Fitzhugh: "The world", he maintained in the Sociology for the South (1854), "is beginning to be satisfied, that it is much safer and better, to look to the past, to trust to experience, to follow nature, than to be guided by the ignis fatuus of a priori speculations of closet philosophers...."<sup>73</sup>

One begins to see what Louis Hartz means by terming the



proslavery South the "Reactionary Enlightenment". The denigration of abstract reason in favour of an appeal to tried and tested experience was a crucial hallmark of the Enlightenment's style. By appropriating this method and tying it to a defence of slavery, the South was detaching the liberal values of the Enlightenment and substituting its own reactionary ones. Too much can be made of this tendency, however, for the Southern attachment to the empirical method was never more than a superficial one and there is good reason for thinking that it was a position which was forced on them by the terms in which the agenda of debate was cloaked. Where the antislavery forces appealed to high-sounding maxims of universal moral right, the proslavery South could only counter with appeals to historical reality, and it is difficult to see what else they could have done. They might, of course, have attempted to manufacture an alternative system of morality to challenge the dominant liberal ideology, and at times it seems as if they were doing exactly that; but if the thesis put forward by W.J.Cash and others is correct - that Southerners suffered agonising guilt over the existence of slavery - it would suggest that Southerners were too firmly gripped by the traditional liberal ethos to distance themselves from it, and that consequently they were unable to construct a meaningful and satisfying counter-culture.<sup>74</sup> In the event, a critique of the existing ideology couched in empirical terms was about as far as they could go.

Calhoun's empiricism claimed to be more systematic, more "scientific", than the bulk of proslavery writing, with possible exception of the fertile school of ethnologists.

Yet, at the same time, it is a curious fact that Calhoun was unwilling to allow his political theory to rest on purely empirical grounds. Having formulated empirically his propositions of human nature, Calhoun then proceeds to attach to them a postulate of divine sanction which, as August Spain has quite rightly pointed out, adds nothing to the theory as a whole.<sup>75</sup> Spain, however, omitted to inquire why Calhoun should have felt the need to include such a postulate when the theory could have stood on perfectly respectable empirical foundations. The inclusion of divine sanction in the Disquisition appears strangely out of place, almost an afterthought, though it does tell us at least two things about Calhoun's concept of Natural Law. In the first place, it demonstrates that Calhoun does possess a notion of Natural Law, though one which is founded on description rather than prescription. Secondly, it tells us that however all-embracing Calhoun's empiricism appears to be on the surface, in the end he is unwilling to allow his empirical postulates to stand on their own. In the next chapter, therefore, we shall examine the extent to which Calhoun uses divine sanction as a convenient buttress, to give an aura of moral legitimacy to his theory, within the context of his overall religious attitudes.



Chapter Five: Calhoun's Religious Thought and the postulates of divine sanction in the Disquisition

If Calhoun's empiricist pretensions did not differ markedly from the mainstream of Southern proslavery writing, the same cannot be said of his religious thinking. In the Disquisition, Calhoun's sparse references to God as "the Infinite Being, the Creator of all" and as "an all-wise Providence" suggest that he was speaking the language of Deism, a conception of the divine so out of place in the Evangelical South that it bears closer examination. Moreover, the role which Calhoun assigns to God in his political theory, as a passive, non-intervening Superintendant of the universe, whilst it bears a superficial similarity to the religious ideas of the Enlightenment, is used to justify decidedly un-enlightened political values. How this comes about is best shown by contrasting Calhoun's religious precepts - as they appear in his political theory - with those of John Locke.

It has already been stated that Calhoun's introduction of a postulate of divine sanction to his propositions of human nature was an inessential addition to the theory of government; inessential, that is, in the sense that its absence would in no substantive way impair the validity of the empirical generalisations on which the propositions were based. All that divine sanction adds to the Disquisition is a veneer of moral authority which in the end is unsuccessful simply because it is so easily detachable from the body of the theory. Such could never be the case with Locke's theory

of government; in Locke, God stands as the ultimate logical and moral justification of the existence of individual natural rights, and without Him the whole of Locke's subsequent theory would crumble. That is, if God were removed from Locke's theory, the rights to life, liberty and property would have no basis in logic, except as unsubstantiated assertions, and hence they could not be properly considered as "rights", but as maxims of prudence or preference. God's role in Locke is, therefore, of crucial importance because He stands as the first cause of political obligation and the arbiter of the rights and duties of individuals.<sup>1</sup>

In Calhoun, too, God is assigned the role of first cause of political obligation, but in a different sense to the one calculated for Him by Locke. Where Locke appeals to reason, the God-given faculty which distinguishes men from brute creation, in deriving his idea of the natural rights of individuals, Calhoun appeals to observation of the actual behaviour of men to ascertain why government is necessary. The origin of government, maintains Calhoun, is deeply rooted in the nature of man, which is ordained by God: he assumes "as an incontestable fact that man is so constituted as to be a social being."<sup>2</sup> There is nothing equivocal about this - man cannot exist without the companionship of his fellows. At the most basic level, the mechanism whereby the species is perpetuated necessarily involves a degree of sociability between men and women, and in this Calhoun finds God's purpose at work. The impulse towards association between individuals does not depend on rational choice, as it does in Locke,<sup>3</sup> but on innate instinct which is stamped on the



nature of each individual by his creator. The social state is therefore not an artificial one, calculated by human reason to minimise the inconveniencies which would inevitably arise in its absence, nor is it formed by the volunteering of consent; it is nothing less than the condition decreed by God for the benefit of mankind and for the development of their faculties.

This single proposition does not, of course, account for the necessity of government, and in order to establish the connection Calhoun interposes a second facet of human nature which he believes to be no less valid empirically than the first: "... while man is created for the social state and is accordingly formed as to feel what affects others as well as what affects himself, he is, at the same time, so constituted as to feel more intensely what affects him directly than what affects him indirectly through others, or, to express it differently, he is so constituted that his direct or individual feelings are stronger than his social or sympathetic feelings."<sup>4</sup> What Calhoun is saying is that man has a capacity for altruism where the affairs of others are concerned, but only to the extent that it does not conflict with his own self-interest. Such a condition, however, is bound to lead at some time or other to conflict: in the ordinary course of events, individuals pursuing their own interests would unavoidably come into conflict with other individuals doing likewise. In that eventuality, Calhoun recognised, there would be a "tendency to a universal state of conflict between individual and individual, accompanied by the connected passions of suspicion, jealousy, anger and

revenge - followed by insolence, fraud and cruelty...."<sup>5</sup> In order to avoid this state of discord, some controlling power was necessary to restrain the impulse towards conflict, and hence we find the origin of government.

If this has seemed to be straying from the point - or anticipating the next chapter - it is not really because Calhoun, by derivation, finds divine sanction for government in the God-given nature of man. If God creates man in such a way as to make government necessary for his preservation and protection, then that is the inescapable conclusion and Calhoun admits it: "Both [society and government] are, however, necessary to the existence and well-being of our race and [are] equally of divine ordination."<sup>6</sup> But is Calhoun here saying very much more than that man has a nature which is God-given? Again, to fully understand the import of his remarks, it is necessary to contrast him with Locke. Locke would not have dissented from the view that ultimately government was a divine institution in the sense that it was intended to make more secure those rights which God had endowed directly on man, and that its construction was accomplished through the use of the God-given faculty of reason. I have underscored the word "ultimately" because I do not think that Locke would have regarded God as being the proximate cause of society and government, but rather that God had provided man with the means of constructing social and political mechanisms by which their rights might be safeguarded, if they should choose to do so. This is, I think, the only possible sense in which Locke's society and government can be construed as being divine, for Locke explicitly



allows men the free choice of remaining in "the Liberty of the State of Nature."<sup>7</sup> In section 13 of the Second Treatise, Locke maintains that "God hath certainly appointed Government to restrain the partiality and violence of men", but this statement in no way lessens the fact that men may, if they wish, choose not to constitute themselves into a civil community.<sup>8</sup>

The crucial difference between Locke and Calhoun on this point is that Calhoun does see God as being the proximate cause of society and government. The necessity for society, according to Locke, becomes apparent to men through the use of their reason; that is, reason tells them the best way of protecting their God-given natural rights.<sup>9</sup> But in Calhoun, reason is assigned a minimal role; political society is not formed by a consciously rational process of deliberation, it is simply instinctive to man's nature. What Calhoun does is to short-circuit the rational faculty of man, and in so doing he dispenses with the voluntarism which is so important to Locke. The formation of society and the existence of government pose no problems of consent for Calhoun because both are natural outgrowths of man's nature. "It is not even a matter of choice", he maintains, "whether there shall be one [a government] or not. Like breathing, it is not permitted to depend on our volition."<sup>10</sup> This is a significant analogy because it portrays exactly Calhoun's sceptical view of the capacity of human reason, and elevates the origin of government to the status of a physical or sensory imperative.

Both government and society, then, arise from an innate instinct planted in each individual by God. A number of

important consequences for Calhoun's political theory flow from this proposal which tend to complicate it, the most important of which involves Calhoun's concept of resistance to tyrannical government.

Calhoun maintains that "although society and government are thus intimately connected with and dependent on each other--of the two society is the greater. It is first in the order of things and in the dignity of its object; that of society being primary--to preserve and perfect our race--and that of government secondary and subordinate--to preserve and perfect society."<sup>11</sup> Now, on the surface this looks very different from Locke's idea of society and government, not least because he (Calhoun) assigns different purposes to each. In Locke, there was no great division of purpose because the creation of government was dependent on the terms of the social contract: the purpose of society was to make more secure the Natural Rights of its citizens, and government, which was the agent of the community, was designed to accomplish that purpose more effectively. In other words, Locke conceived government as the instrument through which the purpose of society might be more efficiently achieved.

Calhoun's division of purpose between society and government looks different from Locke's, but in fact it differs hardly at all. The great object of society, he maintains, is to preserve and perfect our race, though what precisely he means by this is obscure for nowhere in the Disquisition does he elaborate on it. Government, on the other hand, is designed to preserve and protect society, and the concrete ways in which government can do this are left



significantly vague. But clearly what Calhoun is saying is that the purpose of government is to facilitate, with the minimum of inconvenience, the primary object of society itself, which is to preserve and perfect the race. Thus, in a sense, Calhoun too sees government as being an instrument which enables society to accomplish its purpose. There is, therefore, little difference between Locke and Calhoun on this point; where they do differ - and massively so - is on the actual purpose itself.

Locke's theory of government and society is a strictly teleological one; that is, the value of social institutions (including society itself) is dependent upon the consequences they produce, and here Locke has an objective standard which is absent in Calhoun. The purpose of society and government is specifically limited to the protection of individual Natural Rights, which men bring with them into society from the original state of nature. The protection of these rights, which are God-given and calculated by reason, form the raison d'etre of society and its agent the government. Moreover, should either society or government seek to deprive any individual of his Natural Rights, it was liable to be dissolved or overthrown because, in that event, it would not be performing the functions it was originally designed to achieve. Locke allows, as indeed logically he must, an ultimate appeal to Heaven for protection against arbitrary invasion of Natural Rights, though he anticipates that such an appeal would only be made "if a long train of Abuses, Prevarications, and Artifices, all tending the same way, make the Design visible to the People, and they cannot but feel, what they lie under,

and see whither they are going."<sup>12</sup> The logic of rebellion, then, lies in Locke's fundamental premise that the rights pertaining to individuals, which are endowed by God, cannot be legitimately abridged by any human power.

Calhoun's theory is not teleological in the same sense that Locke's is, and this is a function of his imprecise and ill-defined statement as to what the purpose of society and government is. "To preserve and perfect" are generalised injunctions, but they offer little specific guide to the limits or sphere of governmental action. Locke's Natural Rights were objectively known through reason and existed independently of society,<sup>13</sup> but in Calhoun there is no equivalent objectivity. Presumably the government in Calhoun's scheme could justify any course of action by claiming that it was intended to "preserve and perfect society", and this could include, of course, the most repressive of policies. What kind of protection could the citizens claim in that eventuality and from what source? Calhoun, logically, cannot allow an ultimate appeal to Heaven because he has already maintained that government exists with divine sanction; to allow the citizens an appeal to God against an agency which He Himself had instituted would imply a contradiction in His plan. How could God ordain government and simultaneously ordain protection against government?

Calhoun seems to have got himself - and God - caught in a tangle at this stage, for the whole premise on which his theory and his political career rested was that government in the United States had actually been abusing its power and tyrannising its citizens. For twenty years Calhoun had consist-



ently maintained that the power of the federal government had been perverted in its imposition of an iniquitous tariff on the South and an attack on its peculiar institution.<sup>14</sup> This he saw as a systematic assault on the rights of the Southern States and as an infringement of the terms of the original contract by which the Union was created. But what kind of rights were being infringed? Under his own theory they could not have been Natural rights because he had effectively demonstrated that no such rights could exist. Furthermore, could not the federal government claim that its policies were intended to "preserve and perfect" society, and thus refute Calhoun on his own ground? Calhoun thus appears to have been hoisted by his own petard, for by conferring divine sanction on the institution of government, he makes it more difficult for himself to argue that there is a legitimate mechanism whereby tyranny may be resisted.

More difficult, certainly, but not impossible, and it is interesting to see how Calhoun extricates himself from this potential pitfall. The key lies in understanding the distinction between the institution of government and the government of men which actually exists at any given moment in time; this is a distinction which Calhoun implies, and one which is necessary to make the theory coherent, but one which he never fully spells out. It is the institution of government which Calhoun is anxious to confer divine sanction on, not one particular group of people who happen at any one time to occupy the office. Calhoun recognised that even though the institution of government may be divine, it was inoperable unless individuals were found to exercise its

functions and powers. By the same token, these men were subject to the same laws of human nature as all other men. Government, then, "although intended to protect and preserve society, has itself a strong tendency to disorder and abuse of its powers, as all experience and almost every page of history testify. The cause is to be found in the same constitution of our nature which makes government indispensable. The powers which it is necessary for government to possess in order to repress violence and preserve order cannot execute themselves. They must be administered by men in whom, like others, the individual are stronger than the social feelings. And hence the powers vested in them to prevent injustice and oppression on the part of others, will, if left unguarded, be by them converted into instruments to oppress the rest of the community."<sup>15</sup> This is how Calhoun manages to justify his concept of resistance to government: although the institution itself is of divine ordination, it can only be put into operation by the efforts of men, by the mingling of the flawed with the divine, which Calhoun confidently asserts will produce disorder and abuse.<sup>16</sup> Before looking at his proposed remedy, it is first necessary to inquire further into the validity of this argument.

Calhoun's distinction between the institution of government and the men who operate it seems entirely scholastic, and has about it the appearance of a contrived device intended to rescue him from the blunder of having claimed divine sanction for government. The distinction actually amounts to very little, since it is inconceivable that the institution, divorced and abstracted from the men who operate



it, could have any practicable value in application. Government as an institution might, indeed, be divine, but it would be perfectly inert; it is only when it comes under the control of men who make laws and execute them that it becomes of paramount importance. By making the distinction, however, Calhoun manages to retain in his theory the sanction of God for government and allows him at the same time to propose a mechanism whereby government may be resisted.

The means by which the abuse of governmental power was to be resisted was the framing of a constitution, an artificial framework by which government was held "strictly to the great ends for which it is ordained."<sup>17</sup> Calhoun notes that there is a "striking difference" between the origin of government and the origin of the constitution, for the "Constitution is the contrivance of man, while government is of divine ordination. Man is left to perfect what the wisdom of the Infinite ordained as necessary to preserve the race."<sup>18</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the theological imperfections of the latter sentence, we can see how Calhoun is attempting to maintain the semblance of consistency in asserting that the constitution is the work of human wisdom. Indeed, he cannot very well claim otherwise, for having said that government is divine, he cannot then say that the resisting mechanism is too. Technically, what he is saying is that the Constitution puts restraints on the men who, at any one time, assume the powers of government, and not on the institution itself, though in the light of what has been said above, the distinction seems spurious.

The precise form of the constitution remains at the heart of Calhoun's theory of government. He rejected outright

and rightly so, the possibility that government could be restrained "by instituting a higher power" because "This would be but to change the seat of authority and to make this higher power, in reality, the government, with the same tendency on the part of those who might control its powers to pervert them into instruments of aggrandizement."<sup>19</sup> So, the idea of imposing an external framework of rules and limitations on the government, drawn up by an alternative agency, would not prevent the abuse of power for it would simply transfer the potentiality for abuse from the government to the other agency. What was really needed, according to Calhoun, was for the government to be organised in such a way that it would, by its own "interior structure", counteract the tendency to abuse of power.<sup>20</sup> To do this, the ruled had to possess an effective means of resisting their rulers by peaceable action, and in order that as large a proportion of the population as possible should have this means, and not simply a majority of the whole, Calhoun proposed his elaborate mechanism, the concurrent majority.

Leaving aside for a later chapter an examination of the theoretical and practical implications of the concurrent majority,\* what I want to stress here is that Calhoun places a high responsibility on the device as a means of nurturing political adjustment precisely because he refuses to allow an ultimate appeal to Heaven as liberal theorists had previously done. Where Locke's liberal teleology had allowed him, indeed had demanded of him, an ultimate means of protection

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\* See chapter nine below.



from the arbitrary usurpation of Natural Rights by a direct appeal to God, Calhoun has no equivalent authority to which to make an appeal, for by establishing the naturalness and divinity of society and government, he cannot then claim God's protection against government. Yet it was a major part of Calhoun's purpose to argue that tyrannical government, however it was defined, ought to be resisted. How could these two positions be coherently reconciled without doing damage to the theory as a whole? The answer is that Calhoun was forced, for the sake of theoretical consistency, to formulate his concept of resistance in terms of an "internal organism" operating within the structure of government itself. This, I think, is a crucially important point because it goes a long way in explaining Calhoun's reliance on what has seemed to some commentators an over-elaborate and hence unworkable mechanistic device for regulating social conflict.<sup>21</sup> In his zeal to destroy Natural Rights, Calhoun eliminates in the process the strongest theoretical justification for resisting arbitrary power, and this seems unavoidable given the strictly deductive character of Natural Rights theory; that is, the right of rebellion which Locke retained is abandoned by Calhoun and is replaced by a self-regulating mechanism which is built into the structure of government itself. Calhoun thus appears to be unwilling to accept logical consequences of what he has done by making government a divine institution - he is not prepared to confer absolute moral legitimacy on all the actions of the government, but insists instead on introducing a device whereby they might be resisted.

Two points concerning this are important to grasp. The

first is that in view of Calhoun's initial statement that government is a divine institution, there are few alternatives which could coherently enable him to subsequently claim that it is possible to resist it. If God ordains government, God cannot also ordain resistance to government on pain of self-contradiction. Calhoun recognises this and admits it: "Constitution is the contrivance of man, while government is of divine ordination...."<sup>22</sup> But, he continues, "Man is left to perfect what the wisdom of the Infinite ordained as necessary to preserve the race."<sup>23</sup> Now, it seems very much as if Calhoun has managed to save his logic, but at the expense of his theology. Not even the most daring of the Enlightenment philosophes, except perhaps those who dispensed with His existence altogether, had suggested that God's work could actually be improved by human wisdom. The essence of Enlightenment deism was that God was the highest and most perfect being in the universe, whose goodness and purpose was displayed in the Book of Nature and in the actuality of events. To suggest as Calhoun does, that God's work may be perfected by man is to portray God either as a perverse Being or a fallible one; Calhoun seems therefore prepared to tolerate a loose theology in order to establish the coherence of his resisting mechanism.

The second and more important point is that if Calhoun's reasoning appears tortured at this stage of the argument, it is so because he has caught himself in a dilemma: if the institution of government is divine, why is it that it needs to be resisted at all? It has already been noted that Calhoun's distinction between the institution itself and the men who



operate it is of little practical merit, except as a philosophical device. The question remains: what logical basis does Calhoun have for maintaining that government ought to be resisted by means of the concurrent majority? In Natural Rights theory, resistance was not merely permissible, but actually a duty imposed on men when their individual Natural rights were threatened,<sup>24</sup> but Calhoun dispenses with this framework altogether. This suggests that Calhoun's teleology was entirely different to that of the social contract writers and it is worthwhile examining this claim, again contrasting Calhoun with Locke. Locke's incorporation into his theory of a right of rebellion against the arbitrary invasion of Natural Rights indicates a keen attachment to a form of individualism which has always been important in American political culture. "Individualism" as a concept describes the moral relation between society and the state on the one hand and the individual human beings it is designed to serve on the other, and it emphasises the primacy of the latter over the former.<sup>25</sup> Thus, in Locke, it is the free and rational choice of individuals which brings the community and its governmental apparatus into being and imposes limits to its legitimate authority; government, in this scheme of things, has no rationale other than to serve the community of individuals which creates it. Even in Hobbes' absolutist theory there is an emphatic strain of individualism, for Hobbes' sovereign power is called into existence by the voluntary choice of men no less than Locke's society is, even though Hobbes is then prepared to sacrifice all individual rights, Natural or otherwise, to the irresistible will of the sovereign.<sup>26</sup>

Calhoun's Disquisition, however, departs sharply from the individualist ethos which in America, more than anywhere else, it had gained so powerful a grip. Calhoun places a higher value on the harmony of society and the absence of debilitating social conflict than he does on the protection of individual rights. His image of society is of an hierarchically structured organism into which individuals fit according to their God-given capacities. In a significant passage in the Disquisition, Calhoun maintains:

To the Infinite Being, the Creator of all, belongs exclusively the care and superintendence of the whole. He, in his infinite wisdom and goodness, has allotted to every class of animated beings its condition and appropriate functions and has endowed each with feelings, instincts, capacities, and faculties best adapted to its allotted condition. To man, he has assigned the social and political state as best adapted to develop the great capacities and faculties, intellectual and moral, with which he has endowed him, and has, accordingly, constituted him so as not only to impel him into the social state, but to make government necessary for his preservation and well-being. 27

Although Calhoun is evidently speaking about the way in which God has organised the whole of created existence, it is not a bad description of his image of the social organism. Calhoun allows the possibility that through sheer industry and self-improvement, individuals may attain a higher status in the community, and thus receive the most prized of rewards, liberty, but the process of mobility is necessarily slow; for to "elevate a people in the scale of liberty above the point to which they are entitled to rise, must ever prove abortive



and end in disappointment."<sup>28</sup> This conception of society as a natural, organic entity contrasts with the rationally artificial version as seen by the social contract writers. Where they viewed the social state as fulfilling the function of protecting Natural Rights, Calhoun saw it as an end in itself. The greatest of political evils for Calhoun was the unnatural disruption of society by anarchic elements because it hindered the orderly processes of life, and, therefore, unlike Locke, he could never sanction the right of revolution.<sup>29</sup> The concurrent majority which he proposed as a substitute for this right of rebellion seems overly-cumbersome precisely because he expects so much of it: political conflict had to be contained within manageable limits and could not be allowed to threaten the existence of society itself. The concurrent majority was therefore not a device which was intended to minimise political conflict, but to channel it into peaceful modes of resolution. In this respect, its attempt to collect the sense of the community (as opposed to a majority of the community) before allowing the government to implement a particular policy, was an effort to establish the limits of consensual politics and, as such, Calhoun regarded it as the only viable alternative to revolution and the dissolution of society.

So far in this chapter I have examined the theoretical implications of Calhoun's religious postulates contained in the Disquisition and I have attempted to show that certain consequences for his theory automatically flow from them; the most important of these consequences, I have argued, is that Calhoun is compelled to formulate his mechanism of

of resistance to tyrannical government in terms of an internal device, which is built into the system, because he has already precluded the possibility of allowing an ultimate appeal to Heaven by making the institution of government divine. However convincing or otherwise Calhoun's argument appears, it is sufficiently different from the mainstream of Southern religious thought of the period to be of interest. In the second half of this chapter I shall be concerned with examining Calhoun's general religious attitudes and how they contrast with the dominant views of his section, for on this important subject Calhoun seems to draw his inspiration from the views of those whose faith was in a rational religion, rather than the emotional Evangelicalism of the South.

If one were describing the religious attitudes of the South at the end of the eighteenth-century, "evangelical" is hardly the adjective which springs most readily to mind. The last echoes of the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s were, by the end of the century, smothered by successive waves of Enlightenment ideas which crossed the Atlantic from Europe. Scepticism in matters of religion - a French speciality - gained greater acceptance in the American South than in any other area of the colonies, though it resulted not in outright atheism, but in a complacent deism.<sup>30</sup> Deism was, perhaps, the most fitting expression of religious sentiment for a nation which was about to enshrine Reason and the Rights of Man as the authoritative statement of its national creed, for it implied no great attachment to frames of thought which were not strictly rational. The Enlightenment spirit in America



demanding, then, that religious attitudes conform as much as possible to the dictates of reason, and that whatever supernatural content remained was to be either ignored or somehow explained away. David Hume's Essay on Miracles, available in America after 1758, though not apparently extensively read, was the authentic expression of this strain of scepticism.<sup>31</sup> The existence of miracles, according to Hume, could never attain a sufficient level of certainty to merit the status of a philosophical proof; miracle, in the sense of a designed violation of the physical laws of nature, could never be categorically asserted because of the inductive nature of "knowing" the laws of nature. Hume concluded that no amount of evidence could establish the existence of miracles and that therefore, they should be regarded essentially as religious (that is, non-rational) phenomena.<sup>32</sup>

I have cited Hume's critique of the concept of miracle as an example of the more rational approach to religion which developed in the eighteenth century. The emphasis on the reasonableness of religious teaching, as opposed to the non-rational and supernatural, was one which suited well the intellectual temperament of the age: where the Puritans, for all their freedom of inquiry, had stressed the Calvinistic version of Christianity, the American Enlightenment emphasised the overwhelming benevolence of God towards His creation. The elitist concept of predestination and election which Calvin had preached no longer seemed to accord with the new found dignity of man as a free, thinking individual in which role the American Revolution had seemed to cast him.<sup>33</sup> The sinfulness of man, a biblical truism, was retained by the American

Enlightenment but with a difference: man's depravity was no longer remediable solely through salvation by faith through grace, but through the active self-improvement of his natural faculties.<sup>34</sup> Man could by his own effort pull himself out of the pit of sin and improve his own condition on earth, without necessarily accepting the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ. Irving Bartlett, in discussing the background of the nineteenth century American mind, has accurately written that "The quest for salvation was replaced by the quest for morality and worldly success, and the sense of sin gave way to the knowledge that man by the use of reason could live blamelessly without God's intervention."<sup>35</sup> The depersonalisation of the Gospel and its central protagonist was one consequence of the intellectual climate of rationalism: interest in the figure of Jesus as a person, human and divine, was overshadowed by an interest in the abstract principles of his teaching. It did not much matter, deists maintained, whether Jesus of Nazareth was God Incarnate or not; what did matter was that he taught principles which were benevolent and which were perceivable as such by all reasonable men. Indeed, Jesus played an insignificant part in deistic theology and, if he was noticed at all, it was as a great teacher.<sup>36</sup> But it was God Himself who was ultimately the most important Being, for He was the one who held the fabric of the universe together at any one moment in time. Yet the God of the deists was as mysterious a being as the Jehovah of the Old Testament, for little could be known about him for certain except that he surveyed the course of human events from on high. In some cases, he was even reduced to the status of an abstraction, a regulatory



principle which dictated the flow of events, and in this impersonal capacity he was usually referred to as "Divine Providence".

At the height of the Revolutionary era in America, deism became the dominant expression of religious sentiment and nowhere more so than in the South.<sup>37</sup> The interaction between political enlightenment, which came to a head in the literature of the Revolution,<sup>38</sup> and religious enlightenment produced in the South a strain of religious liberalism which was more pronounced than in other parts of the colonies. The declining membership of the evangelical churches (mainly the Baptists and the Methodists) was evidence of a general southern revulsion against the excessive "enthusiasm" and emotionalism of orthodox evangelical Christianity. Amongst the Southern intellectual class, deism was especially apparent for it became a badge of enlightened refinement which the less articulate and literate portions of southern society lacked. More than anything else, deism betokened an increasing indifference to the cosmological preoccupations which had absorbed the interest of earlier generations of Americans; questions concerning eternal salvation, which their forefathers had taken seriously, became increasingly less important than the pressing issues of the present.<sup>39</sup>

Deism was, however, a passing phase in the religious and intellectual development of the South. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, religious radicalism was becoming as unfashionable as its political counterpart and by the 1830s Southern deism was on the way to extinction. The North Carolina Constitution of 1832 expressly declared that "No person

who shall deny the being of God, or the truth of the Christian religion, or the divine authority of the Old or New Testament... shall be capable of holding any office or place of trust or profit in the civil department within this state."<sup>40</sup> The resurgence of orthodox Christianity in the South after a period of scepticism and deism seems a startling development and one which historians have accounted for by associating it with the need to defend the institution of slavery. Increased attacks on the institution led Southerners to close ranks on intellectual speculation and to develop a dogmatic orthodoxy with which to refute such attacks. The Evangelical mentality, especially in its deference to the authority of the bible, provided a suitable rallying point from which the defence of slavery could be conducted. One ought, perhaps, to distinguish between the brands of evangelicalism which characterised the sections in the decades prior to the Civil War for in their consequences they led to radically differing conceptions of political action. Northern evangelicals, like Arthur and Lewis Tappan, were inspired by the biblical account of God's justice and love to oppose slavery wherever it existed by supplying the national abolitionist societies with material aid.<sup>41</sup> This form of evangelical Christianity was outward looking in the sense that it had shifted the emphasis away from personal salvation towards a reform of earthly things. The southern version, however, became increasingly introverted by insisting on a fundamentalist interpretation of the Scriptures, for even the most amateur exegete could find there support for the institution.<sup>42</sup> Historians have tended, therefore, to view the Southern return to



fundamentalist-evangelical orthodoxy as an unnatural by-product of the search for a defence of slavery. Henry F. May has suggested, however, that the relation is more complex in that the rise of fundamentalist-evangelicalism was as much a consequence of the emotionally unsatisfying facets of deism as it was of the need to defend slavery; moreover, as fundamentalist-evangelicals gained converts in the South, the churches were led to modify their anti-slavery stance which had been a feature of their early history. The primacy of the search for salvation could not allow secular affairs to alienate potential converts, and thus whatever anti-slavery sentiments southern evangelicalism had once given rise to was quickly sublimated. "The collapse of evangelical anti-slavery", writes Henry May, "is the most melancholy fact in American religious history."<sup>43</sup> By the 1830s, the South was firmly within the fundamentalist-evangelical camp, and continued to be so until after the Civil War. Between 1820 and 1850, membership of the evangelical churches in the South increased dramatically: in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia, the Baptist membership in 1820 had collectively been just 99,000, but by 1850 this number had increased to 246,000. Similar proportional increases were evident in the Methodist Church in those same states.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the doctrinal positions of these churches were becoming more conservative in a return to traditional Calvinist theology coupled with a strong reaction against religious rationalism. Charles Sydnor has characterised the trend as being "not so much from liberalism to conservatism as it was from intellectualism to emotionalism", but this is only partly true because the essence of conservative theology is its

emphasis on the life of faith rather than intellect.<sup>45</sup> A better characterisation would be to say that southern religion became both conservative and anti-intellectual, that is more Calvinistic and non-rational, and its symbol became the literal interpretation of Scripture.

The resurgence of southern evangelicalism in the first half of the nineteenth century, with its distinctively fundamentalist complexion, marked a complete turnabout from the heyday of the American Enlightenment in which the South had played so prominent a role at the end of the previous century. The South, whose deistic liberalism had shocked conservative New Englanders at the time of the Revolution, was becoming the citadel of conservative theology. Its religious leaders, in turn, were shocked at the unorthodoxy of New England."<sup>46</sup> But this judgement of Sydnor's is not without its difficulties either, for although the South became more rigid in religious terms, there existed at the same time a small but vocal intellectual minority which dissented strenuously from the imposition of orthodox Christian values on the life of the southern mind. The school of proslavery ethnologists, led by Josiah Nott, George Gliddon and others, were at least as interested in undermining the rising wave of evangelical biblicism with which the majority of the South sought to defend slavery, as they were in defending slavery themselves on purely scientific grounds. Indeed, William Stanton has gone so far as to claim that "The conscious extrascientific bond which linked many of these men together was not sympathy for Southern institutions but an anticlericalism and antibiblicism."<sup>47</sup> The publication of Josiah Nott's Two Lectures on the Natural History of the



Caucasian and Negro Races in 1844 was the opening shot in an extended campaign between the ethnologists and biblicists, when Nott denied the scientific validity of the Mosaic account of creation contained in the Book of Genesis. The essence of his attack was that differences in physiology could only be accounted for by maintaining that there had been several separate creations of the races instead of one. The theory of diverse origins, as it was called, scientifically plausible in the days before Darwin, was, however, pregnant with implication for social and political thought. The North could not accept it, not because it was scientifically untenable, but because it implied that there was a qualitative difference in the degrees of humanity between the races, which in turn gave a scientific basis for, and a justification of, the origin of slavery. The South, on the other hand, which might have been expected to embrace such findings with relish, was extremely reluctant to accept any theory which conflicted so starkly with biblical accounts of creation. The curious position developed, therefore, where the ethnologists and the biblicists were agreed on the legitimacy of slavery, but were in conflict with each other.<sup>48</sup>

The deliberately provocative stance of the ethnologists towards the biblical fundamentalism of other proslavery writers served to reaffirm the South's commitment to evangelical Christianity.<sup>49</sup> Gliddon's Types of Mankind, the second part of which was devoted to biblical criticism, drew the fire of the reviewer of the Richmond Enquirer of July 6, 1854; the bible was, maintained the reviewer, "the grand object of attack from Abolitionists, because they know it is the bulwark of Southern

principles.... Destroy the Bible, and you lay bare the very citadel of our strength to our foes.... Let us not then allow this shield of strength to be torn from us until we have something to put in its place."<sup>50</sup> Clearly, this reviewer saw the Bible as a means of defending slavery and not as the repository of divine truth, and therefore as an end in itself. But the same could not be said of the general position of the South, for the rejection of ethnology in favour of the Bible betokened a commitment to religion which was far deeper than regarding it simply as a convenient pretext with which to defend slavery. After all, scientific evidence did lend considerable support to slavery, at least as much as the Bible did; but the decision to back the Bible, as it were, underlined the deep-rootedness of the South's religious convictions.

I have spoken at some length about the fundamentalist-evangelicalism of the South and its relation to the defence of slavery because it marks a point of contrast with Calhoun's religious attitudes. So far from being a fervent evangelical, Calhoun tended towards the cold, analytical and philosophical precepts of Unitarianism,<sup>51</sup> which is more reminiscent of the intellectual religious style of the North than it was of the emotional South. Although Calhoun spent his formative years in a strictly Calvinistic environment, he displayed no great preoccupation with religion in his later years, except insofar as it touched political life. At the same time, many of Calhoun's fundamental assumptions seem to have been shaped by the harsh dogma of Calvinism, with its emphasis on the inherent depravity of man. In the Disquisition, Calhoun's propositions of human nature, and especially the primacy of self-interest,



although they are supposedly empirically drawn, seem at times to have an a priori squint derived from Calvinist doctrine. But then there is nothing remarkable about this, for exactly the same thing may be said of the Founding Fathers.<sup>52</sup>

What is remarkable about Calhoun's religious views is that they seem to be at odds with the fervent, emotional biblical faith which most of the proslavery school shared, and this once more begs the question as to what Calhoun's intention in writing the Disquisition was. If it was nothing more than a proslavery polemic, why did he bother to evolve an elaborate political theory when there was a ready-made biblical defence of the institution at hand? Part of the answer, which has already been touched on, is that he was attempting to transcend the immediate debate over slavery and to expound the underlying principles of political behaviour which could be applied to all kinds of situations. Another part of the answer is that he was dissatisfied with the literal appeal to Scripture because it did not accord with his own enlightened religious beliefs. There is considerable evidence that Calhoun's religious attitudes were more consonant with those of the Enlightenment than with the proslavery fundamentalists. Mary Boykin Chesnut reported in her Diary from Dixie that "Mr. Calhoun's piety was of the most philosophical type"<sup>53</sup> and Margaret Coit is emphatic that he refused to become a professing Christian because he was searching for a faith which accorded, or at least did not conflict with, his reason.<sup>54</sup> Calhoun, moreover, retained an aloofness to the appeals of his friends that he accept the salvation offered through Jesus Christ the Saviour; in December 1843, R.B. Rhett wrote Calhoun:

Let me implore you, my aged friend  
and political Father, seek God in  
Christ. I have found him, and you  
will find him also if you will  
seek him. Excuse me, if it is  
presumption, in thus speaking to  
you, and attribute it, to a  
sincere and affectionate interest  
in your temporal and spiritual  
welfare. That God will bless and  
visit you and yours with his  
salvation is the prayer of

Your Friend

R.B.Rhett 55

Calhoun's reply to Rhett is not recorded, but Coit maintains that even on his deathbed he refused to accept Christian succour, and this suggests that Calhoun was not susceptible to persuasion on this point.<sup>56</sup>

By far the most visible sign of Calhoun's religious convictions is apparent in his attitude to the mutual interaction between politics and religion. He seems to have regarded religion as being important only insofar as it offered a standard of morality to which political values should be geared, though it must be admitted that his standard is not always clearly defined. In February 1833, in a speech on the Force Bill, he referred to the increase in Bibles as leading to a more favourable regard for religion and morality;<sup>57</sup> what is notable is that he did not say that such an increase would lead to personal salvation, which is the significance an evangelical would have perceived in such a fact. Religion for Calhoun, as for Edmund Burke and Benjamin Franklin, was important in that it diffused a sense of stability and order into social relationships.<sup>58</sup> Charles Cotesworth Pinckney recounted in the 1890s a conversation with Calhoun concerning a sermon both had heard on the benefits of the Christian Sabbath. After



Calhoun had recapitulated the main points of the sermon, he added an extra benefit which, he thought, the clergy did not appreciate - its social influence:

.... The very fact of meeting together once a week, with a common object in view, uniting in the same acts of worship, shaking hands with your neighbour at the church door, asking after his family, even remarking that it is a pleasant day, - all these things have a wonderful power in binding men together and diffusing harmony in the community. If any difficulty should occur this week between us, if my servants or my cattle should trespass upon you, depend upon it, we would be more ready to settle it peaceably from having met and exchanged courtesies at the church door. The social influence of this observance is most salutary. 59

Calhoun seems, therefore, to have been more interested in the social effects of religion than in the possibility of eternal salvation. To him, God was an impersonal Providence, "the Great Disposer of Events", "He who governs all things".<sup>60</sup> He seems not to have considered deeply the figure of Jesus Christ as Saviour, for his concept of God was too abstract, too impersonal. God manifested Himself through the regularities of physical and moral laws, and this was all that was needed to tell Calhoun that He existed.

It is clear that Calhoun's religious views were closer to the spirit of the Enlightenment than they were to the fundamentalist-evangelicalism of the proslavery South. In the Disquisition, his concept of a divine Providence superintending the whole of creation lacked entirely the emotional fervency of a full-blooded evangelical faith. Yet, by the same token,

Calhoun, unencumbered by the intricacies of Christian theology, was able to find in his concept of God a sanction for the status quo. Since God was the Author of all being, whatever was, was necessarily right. Moreover, in his scheme of things, Calhoun assigned to God the role of overseer of the whole; the harsh realities of life made it almost inevitable that some individuals would suffer injustices and unfairness, but these could be tolerated in the sure knowledge that ultimately society as a whole would benefit. Calhoun therefore falls outside the individualist tradition in emphasising the importance of the community over and above the individual. In the process, he remoulds the role assigned to God by Locke by making Him the guardian not of individual rights, but of the rights of communities. Communities therefore are left to decide the rights which its individual citizens may enjoy, and these have the vicarious sanction of God. It is crucially important that in making its decision the community consults all the interests involved, for once the decision is made there can be no further court of appeal. Calhoun allows no right of revolution by an appeal to Heaven as Locke does because that would be logically improper given the premises he works from; if he wants to retain a protective device, it must take a form other than an appeal to the right of rebellion. This is precisely what Calhoun's concurrent majority is intended to accomplish. It aims at eliminating the possibility of social rupture by ascertaining the lowest common denominator of policy which is acceptable to all interests involved; only then can that policy be put into effect. The concurrent majority is also more ambitious as a protective device in that it aims



to prevent social disintegration by collecting the sense of the community before putting policy into action, rather than reacting to illegitimate abuse of power. The problem that he never actually comes to grips with, though it is implicit in everything he writes in the Disquisition, is how the various interests of the community are identified. Calhoun himself talks about geographical and economic interests, but once one begins to talk in this vein the problem arises as to where to draw the line. Logically, if all the interests of the community are to be consulted, this would necessarily involve taking account of the interests of each individual, a situation which, as Louis Hartz has maintained, "unravels itself out into Locke's state of nature."<sup>61</sup> What Calhoun has to say about this in the Disquisition is explored more fully in Chapter Nine.